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BENGAL FIRE
A CRIME CLUB *Novel*

A Crime Club Detective Story

MR. LAWRENCE BLOCHMAN, author of that successful novel, *Bombay Mail*, again chooses India as the setting for a fast-moving detective story. The cheerful crowd of wedding guests that had assembled for the wedding of Harrison J. Hoyt, well-known publicity agent in Calcutta, was hushed into grim silence when out of as strange a bridal coach as ever carried groom to church fell a lifeless body. Harrison Hoyt was dead. It was as mysterious a crime as even that country of mystery and intrigue had ever known. But Hoyt was not the only victim in this astonishing case. Mr. Blochman exploits his original and unusual setting to the full, and recounts some extraordinary happenings in a very readable and racy style.

By the Same Author

BOMBAY MAIL

BENGAL FIRE

by
LAWRENCE G BLOCHMAN



Published for
THE CRIME CLUB
by COLLINS 48 PALL MALL
LONDON

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
COLLINS CLEAR-TYPE PRESS : LONDON AND GLASGOW
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*All the characters and names in this
novel are purely imaginary and have
no reference whatsoever to any existent
person.*

CHAPTER I

No one in Calcutta would think of writing a letter on any day of the week except Thursday, any more than a New Yorker would think of moving any day but October 1st. On Thursday the mail leaves for Europe and America via Bombay, and on Thursday only an insurance salesman would think of violating the warning, "This is mail day" signs which go up in every office from Clive Street to the Maidan. Therefore the hubbub which boiled through the publicity offices of Harrison J. Hoyt on this particular Thursday was, to say the least, unusual. And to tall, placid Lee Marvin, who had hurried away from his own mail at Calcutta headquarters of Orfèvre, Ltd., it was positively alarming.

As Marvin announced himself to Babu Gundranesh Dutt, the rotund Bengali clerk who guarded Hoyt's outer portals, he heard tempestuous sounds of an altercation approaching a climax on the other side of the partition. One voice, which Marvin did not know, swelled and spluttered with rage; the other—Hoyt's—answered in a sarcastic monotone. Marvin could not distinguish words. He sat down between two other men waiting in Hoyt's outer office.

Marvin knew both the men by sight. One was Henry Kobayashi, a lynx-eyed, Hawaiian-born Japanese, with an aggressive American manner and a job of flooding India with the cheap product of Osaka cotton mills. The other, a light-skinned Hindu with an almond-green turban piled high on his scornful head, was Chitterji Rao, household officer for the Maharajah of Jharnpur. . . .

Chitterji Rao was returning Marvin's glance with cold disdain, when the door to Hoyt's inner office burst open and huge, sanguine-faced Kurt Julius stormed forth, choking with indignation. Julius, Marvin knew, was a wild-animal merchant. He waddled past without a glance. With a savage tug he opened the collar of his high, Dutch-style white jacket, as though to make room for the choleric expansion of his florid throat. A small silver button popped off the jacket and rolled along the floor to Marvin's feet. As Julius stamped from the room, Marvin picked up the button and examined it idly. It was of a common type of detachable button made in imitation of the old-time Siamese *tical*, but in execution it was decidedly uncommon. The convex surface of the silver was intricately carved in the shape of a tiger's head. Marvin put the button in his pocket.

Harrison Hoyt appeared on the threshold of his office door. Henry Kobayashi and Chitterji Rao arose expectantly. Hoyt beckoned to Marvin. The Hindu and the Japanese glared at the late arrival who was being accorded special favours.

"I got your chit," said Marvin, when the door closed behind him, "and I came right over. Is the Bosa pearl finally——?"

"No!" Hoyt interrupted with a quick, apprehensive gesture for silence. He looked uneasily toward the door to the outer office, then continued in a low voice: "As a matter of fact, I will have news for you on that matter some time to-day. But I can't talk about it now. I sent for you because I want you to do me a personal favour."

Hoyt tossed over a salmon-coloured telegraph form.

"I want you to meet the Burmah Mail steamer to-day," he said, "and take care of a girl for me."

Marvin's expression changed as he read the signature on the radiogram:

ARRIVING CALCUTTA S.S. BANGALORE
THURSDAY LOVE

EVELYN.

He said nothing as he folded the paper and handed it back, but there was reluctance in the gesture with which he smoothed his red hair—a deep red, the colour of polished mahogany. There was reluctance, too, in his frank blue eyes, the blueness of which was accentuated by the healthy tan of his face. It was a strong, clean-cut face, softened a little by the good-humour of his M-shaped mouth, but still virile—so virile that the vertical indentation in his chin could not be called a dimple.

“You’re going to do it for me, aren’t you, Lee?” said Hoyt, smiling across his desk. With that prop smile of his, Hoyt could be the most charmingly disagreeable person in Calcutta. Usually the sight of it made Lee Marvin contemplate doing violence to the gleaming octave of perfect Hoyt teeth. But to-day there was something tragic about the insincerity of the smile, something that reminded Marvin of the pitiful bravado of a condemned man afraid to die.

“Be reasonable, Harry,” said Marvin. “This is no job for any one but yourself.”

“You used to say you owed me your life,” said Hoyt. His smile was more ingratiating than ever, yet Marvin could not rid himself of the impression that it was merely a futile mask for some great, unspoken fear. “Now you won’t even meet a boat for me.”

“Harry, I don’t like tears—and you’ll have to face them sooner or later. After all this is your mess. The girl’s not engaged to me.”

“To me either,” said Harrison J. Hoyt.

“She must think she is,” protested Marvin. “You

always said you were going to bring her to India when you had the money."

"That was two years ago," said Hoyt. "After two years you'd think any girl would have sense enough to know how things stood."

Marvin gave a non-committal shrug. "Then why is she coming to India——"

"To make trouble," Hoyt declared, tapping the telegraph form. "Why didn't she write she was coming? Or at least send me a cable from Singapore, where she changed ships. Or from Penang. Instead she sends a last minute radiogram from the ship, figuring I won't have time to hide out on her."

"Listen, Harry, if there's going to be any trouble——"

"You've got to do it, Lee." Hoyt leaned across the desk to grasp Marvin's wrists with tight, desperate fingers. "You've got to meet Evelyn—and keep her from coming up here. I can't leave my office this afternoon, Lee. It's a matter of life and death. If it weren't so damned important I wouldn't ask you to do this. . . . The *Bangalore* is due at three-thirty. You'd better start for the Kidderpore docks."

The haggard despair in Hoyt's face, despair that defied all his efforts to be gaily nonchalant, finally decided Marvin. With a tremendous sigh he capitulated.

"All right," he said, "I'll do the dirty work. What's Evelyn's last name?"

"Branch."

"And what does Evelyn Branch look like?"

"Oh, she has grey-green eyes," said Hoyt trying unsuccessfully to be casual. "That's about all I remember."

"Don't be so damned off-hand," said Marvin, "or I'm liable to get a black eye for accosting the wrong woman. Where's that picture you used to have on your

desk until Antoinette came romping into your life last year ? ”

Hoyt opened the bottom drawer of his desk, pushed aside a loaded revolver and lifted out a leather frame. Marvin noticed that the frame was mouldy, as was all leather that had been neglected during the monsoon, but that the revolver was freshly oiled. He reached for the photograph and with his thumb wiped off the greenish tropical fungus clouding the glass until he could make out the features of a rather pretty girl. Her hair was of some vague light colour that the photographer had made decidedly blonde in spots by tricks in lighting and focus. There were also luscious high-lights on the lips, not at all compatible with the outline of the mouth which was young and trusting, nor with the big, wondering eyes. The girl was not a babe in arms, however. Marvin drew this conclusion from the poise of her head, which was sure, proud, almost imperious. He was glad of that.

“ You’d better get going, Lee.” Hoyt reached for the photograph. “ Good luck with Evelyn.”

“ Thanks,” said Marvin with a wry grin. “ What shall I tell her ? ”

“ Anything you want.”

“ Shall I be very blunt and tell her that you’re getting married to-morrow ? ”

“ May as well. She’ll have to find out.”

Marvin still hesitated.

“ And what shall I do with her, after I’ve broken the news ? ”

“ Oh, yes.” Hoyt peeled off a fifty-rupee note from a fat bank-roll. “ Better take her to the Grand Hotel and put her up. But keep her away from me—at least until after the wedding.”

“ I’ll try,” said Marvin. “ But if——”

“ No ifs,” interrupted Hoyt, smiling with all his

teeth, while his eyes grew even darker with hopeless horror. "Hurry, or you'll miss the boat. Don't forget my bachelor dinner's at nine."

Without listening to Marvin's answer, Hoyt pushed him toward the door. Marvin went out. As he crossed the outer office, he acknowledged with a preoccupied nod the beaming salutation of Babu Gundranesh Dutt. He also nodded, on general principles, to Henry Kobayashi and to Chitterji Rao, who sat uneasily in a rattan arm-chair and fidgeted with the line of jet buttons that bisected the front of his long, high collared black coat. The household officer of His Highness did not change the impersonal expression of his bulging eyes, the whites of which were as blue as skimmed-milk.

The Hindu's stare gave Marvin a queer sensation of cold at the pit of his stomach as he hurried downstairs. Whether it was the eyes of Chitterji Rao, the sly smirk of Henry Kobayashi, the crimson rage of Kurt Julius, or the ill-concealed terror of Hoyt himself, Marvin left the office with the definite impression that Harrison Hoyt was at last being sucked down into the quicksands he had so cleverly skirted for so long.

At the curb Marvin hailed a dilapidated taxi. "Kidderpore Docks," he told the driver, a Sikh with a square black beard.

CHAPTER II

A SOFT, hot rain was falling as Marvin's taxi honked its way along Chowringhee to Sir James Outram's statue, then cut across the Maidan to Red Road. It was the last of the Monsoon rains and would be followed, after a few steamy autumn weeks characterised chiefly by the annual invasion of green flies, by the period known technically as the "cold weather" because the temperature sometimes fell below seventy at night. Elsewhere in Calcutta people were hailing the end of the Monsoon with considerable enthusiasm, because practically the entire social calendar of the Second City of the Empire is crowded into the three months between the advent of the green flies and the arrival of the first burning days of February. Lee Marvin, however, was occupied with less pleasant thoughts. As the rain pattered on his khaki topee, he was meditating upon the disagreeable nature of the mission before him. He was also cursing his predicament of being under obligations to a man whom he thoroughly disliked and yet pitied as well. Cursing, of course, was futile. The fact remained that Marvin *had* gone swimming in the surf at Puri, nearly a year ago, and he *had* been drinking champagne, and he *had* got a cramp, and Hoyt *had* pulled him out to safety. There was nothing particularly heroic in Hoyt's action, since the surf was rather quiet that night. But there was no denying that if Hoyt hadn't done what he did, Lee Marvin would probably have drowned. And after all, a man can't refuse to do a favour for a person who has saved his life, even a fairly obnoxious person. At least, a man

like Lee Marvin couldn't refuse. And Harrison Hoyt knew it and took advantage of it.

Harrison Hoyt was a shrewd, curly-haired New Yorker with no humour in his dark eyes, but a great propensity for getting his long, sharp nose into other people's affairs. He had been a press agent ; even after the birth of that glorified creature, the Public Relations Counsel, Hoyt had still remained a press agent—which shows how little dignity he possessed. But what he lacked in dignity he made up in enterprise. He had come to India as a ghost writer for Kurt Julius, the buyer of wild animals. Julius, finding himself practically the only important middleman in elephants and tigers who had neither a book nor a movie to his credit, had hired Hoyt to put him into literature. That was two years ago. Hoyt had come out with Kurt Julius on his annual cold-weather visit, and had not gone back since.

Calcutta, Hoyt found, was a fertile field for a bright young advertising man. Publicity in India was in its infancy. The British in the East had too great an Emersonian confidence in the quality of their mouse-traps. They needed some one like Hoyt to pave that path through the woods and set up neon signs along the way. So Hoyt opened a publicity office of his own. He built up a strange and wonderful clientele. Julius, of course, was still his client when he came each winter. Then there were a few wealthy Indians, anxious to improve their relations with the British *raj* by favourable press notices ; a Parsi promoter, a few rich Bengali race horse owners, and, strangely enough, Englishmen and even Englishwomen, who retained him professionally while despising him socially ; he might just as well have been in trade, for all he was ever invited to a Government House garden party. It was even rumoured, over the tea cups at Firpo's and Peliti's and

the Tollygunj Gymkhana, that Hoyt must be indulging in petty blackmail to secure some of his clients. Lee Marvin could not verify these rumours, but he was ready to believe them, in view of the financial advantage to which Hoyt was turning Marvin's own sense of gratitude. Only last week Hoyt had asked to borrow another thousand rupees.

"Look here," Marvin had protested, "You're already into me for seven thousand dibs, and you keep on spending money as if you hadn't a debt in the world. You're living in a grand manner that I couldn't afford myself. . . ."

"That's just swank for business reasons," said Hoyt. "Anyhow, saving your life is worth more than seven thousand rupees, isn't it?"

"Of course, if you put it on that basis. I thought you were asking for a loan. Apparently I'm paying salvage fees on my own carcass."

"Not at all. You're making a down payment on the Bosa pearl."

"The Bosa pearl?"

"I see you know it."

"Naturally. The Maharajah of Jharnpur's——?"

"What's it worth?"

"Let's see . . ." Marvin made mental calculations. The Bosa pearl was at least a hundred-grainer . . . "Roughly, about ten thousand sterling," he said.

"If you're discreet—and play ball with me—I can get it for you for five."

Marvin had smiled. The Bosa pearl for five thousand sterling, and he could practically write his own ticket with Orfèvre, Ltd. The well-upholstered executive chair he had been vaguely promised in the Paris branch, at least; possibly even a better boost to New York. But he was not counting on it, despite Hoyt's relations with the Maharajah of Jharnpur. Very likely Hoyt

was merely talking an extra thousand rupees out of the good-natured Marvin. The Bosa pearl was probably a figment of his active imagination, Marvin mused, while this girl he was on his way to meet was a real problem. . . .

Marvin's taxi arrived at the Kidderpore docks just as the *Bangalore* was churning fresh mud from the bottom of the brown Hooghly, preparatory to warping alongside her pier, Marvin hurried through the customs sheds and reached the bulkhead in time to see Evelyn Branch standing at the rail of the incoming ship. He recognised her from the photograph—the same, proud carriage of her blonde head; a little more so, even. From a distance the outlines of her full lips seemed less young and trusting, too. The girl had evidently grown up some since Hoyt's picture was taken. She seemed capable of sharp answers. Marvin was glad of that. He would rather have curses than tears.

Evelyn Branch was scanning the faces of the small crowd on the pier, obviously looking for Harrison Hoyt. She leaned her elbows on the rail, her white bouclé dress moulded against her by the wind that swept the river.

The gangplank was hoisted aboard. In a few minutes Evelyn Branch came down.

Marvin touched her arm.

"Welcome to India, Miss Branch," he said.

The girl turned, her lips parted with joyous expectancy. She was ready to fall into his arms. When she saw him, her eyes clouded with puzzled disappointment. They were the same big wondering eyes of the photograph. Marvin gallantly risked sunstroke and took off his topee.

"Did you just speak to me?" asked Evelyn Branch.

"I did, Miss Branch."

"But . . . do I know you?"

"You do not, Miss Branch. But if you'll come over

this way, so that I may help you clear the customs, I'll explain."

"I'm sorry. I was expecting——"

"I know, Miss Branch." Marvin put on his topee and took the girl's arm. "You see, I'm a friend of Harrison Hoyt."

"Where——?" The girl stopped dead in her tracks. There was anguish in her voice. She was afraid to finish her question.

"He was unable to come, Miss Branch," said Marvin. He didn't look at her. He started her walking again. They had reached the hot gloom of the customs shed before she said sharply: "Why?"

"Temporarily incapacitated," said Marvin. "Nothing serious, of course. One of the many minor but annoying visitations which we in the tropics——"

"Please tell me the truth," interrupted the girl, a little breathless.

"Do you mean to tell me to my face that I'm not a convincing liar?" It was positively wicked, being facetious on the threshold of a tragic moment, but Marvin couldn't help it. It was the only way he could keep himself from suddenly running out on the whole disagreeable business.

"Well?" Evelyn was growing impatient. "Is this one of Harrison's little jokes?"

"It's no joke, I assure you." Be brutal, Marvin was telling himself; that's the kindest way. "You see, Hoyt is getting married to-morrow."

Evelyn Branch started to smile, as though to say, then he did get my radiogram after all, and he's rushing marriage preparations . . . The smile did not materialise. A peculiar blank expression came over her face. Quick, Marvin, the *coup de grace*. . . .

"He's marrying a rather unpleasant person named Antoinette Vrai," he said.

Evelyn Branch did not gasp, sway, or burst into tears. With her unfinished smile still on the ends of her lips, she looked right through Marvin into another world, a far-away world peopled by friends and hopes and ambitions, cut off from her by the seven seas. She was completely oblivious of the bustle of stewards, Eurasian customs inspectors marking luggage with chalk hieroglyphics, unsanitary Ooria coolies struggling with bags and boxes, hotel runners, helpless passengers. Evelyn seemed suddenly very much alone, yet she was not forlorn. She seemed to Marvin very brave and charmingly determined. Then she began to laugh—not hysterically or sardonically, but softly, just as though her tragic, futile trip of half-way around the earth to marry a man who belonged to another woman was a tremendous joke on her.

"I guess I'm just a damned fool," she said at last.

From that moment Marvin ceased to act for Harrison Hoyt. He was no longer making the best of an unpleasant duty. He was sympathetically and sincerely interested in the personal problem of an engaging, if too trusting, young woman, when he said :

"I wouldn't say that. You're not a mind reader. You didn't know he was marrying some one else, did you?"

"Of course not. Why do you suppose I came out?"

"Did you have any inkling that . . . I mean, did Harrison Hoyt tell you not to come to India?" Marvin asked.

The girl hesitated an instant. She gave Marvin a quick, sharp glance, as though she were seeing him as a person for the first time, making a split-second appraisal, weighing his motives.

"No," she said, almost immediately.

"Then you'd better go right back home—brutal as it may sound."

"Home?" Evelyn Branch laughed nervously. "I

can't—unless steamer tickets grow on trees in this lush climate. It took all my hard-earned cash to get out here. I was so confident that——” Her voice failed. *For the first time the hopeless pathos of her predicament seemed to touch her.*

“I'll stake you to a ticket,” said Marvin impetuously.

“No, thanks.” Pathetic? Cold as ice, now. Haughty. A little indignant, even. “Don't think for a moment that I'd accept money from Harrison Hoyt. Tell him he doesn't have to buy me off; I won't start trouble. And I don't want pity money.”

“I wasn't speaking for Hoyt. I was speaking for myself.”

“Oh.” Again that quick, sharp glance. “Then you're a little premature. I don't rebound quite that quickly. . . .”

“Thank you,” said Marvin, “for overestimating my seductive enterprise. But I really never imagined my manly appeal to be quite so instantaneously infallible.”

“I'll apologise,” said the girl, “if you'll explain why a perfect stranger would make such a generous proposal—without strings. . . .”

“In the first place, I'm not perfect,” Marvin began. Then he stopped. Why indeed? It was difficult to analyse the reasons behind his impulsive offer. He would have to explain what the clean, subtle charm of a girl fresh from the temperate zone could do to a man who for years had seen youth only in brown women, or in pale, washed-out white women who had been made listless by the tropics and vain by the exaggerated adulation of a five-to-one preponderance of males. He would have to explain how the mere sight of her had stirred in him the hungry interplay of starved emotions, the urge of forgotten chivalry. Before he could do any explaining at all, Evelyn Branch said :

"If you'll excuse me—I think my baggage is all ashore."

"Yes, of course." Marvin made an abrupt descent into reality. Unbidden, he helped the girl through the customs formalities.

She was locking her trunks when a fellow passenger approached her—a bronzed, square-jawed, stockily built man who wore crisp khaki and carried a swagger stick. While he was shaking hands with Evelyn Branch his insolent grey eyes were calmly cataloguing the details of Lee Marvin's appearance.

"Mr. Hoyt show up?" he asked, still looking at Marvin.

"No," said Evelyn without wincing.

"Are you looking for Mr. Hoyt?" Marvin asked.

"Not particularly," said the man with the square jaw. "I guess I know where to find him. Are you going to the Grand, Miss Branch?"

"She is," said Marvin, scowling. He had taken an instant and instinctive dislike to the girl's shipboard friend.

"Oh, Colonel Linnet," the girl interposed, "may I present Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Marvin. Lee Marvin."

"Howdy," said Colonel Linnet without shaking hands. He turned immediately to the girl. "Well, I've got to rush off. See you later, sister."

As he walked away, Marvin noticed that he wore a grey glove on his left hand, which hung motionless at his side as though it were artificial.

"I don't think you'd better go to the Grand after all," said Marvin, watching Linnet disappear. "The Great Eastern will be preferable."

"They're the best hotels in town, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm not going to either. Too expensive. I'm going to a boarding house."

"You can't do that," Marvin protested. "The Europeans in India have a caste system that beats anything the Hindus ever invented. You've got to keep up——"

"Nonsense," said Evelyn Branch. "What's a decent boarding house?"

"Well . . ." Marvin capitulated. "There's Mrs. Pereira's. At least that's clean."

"That's where I'm going. Taxi?"

"I'll see that you're settled," said Marvin.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not. Thanks, just the same, but I . . . I think I want to be alone."

"I understand. Perhaps you'll let me come to see you when you get established. I might be able to help you with your plans. . . ."

"My plans are all made," Evelyn declared. "I expect to be very busy. . . ."

"I hope I'm not inquisitive," said Marvin. "But you're not counting on getting a job, are you?"

"Why not? I'm a pretty good secretary. . . ."

"Secretary?" Marvin shook his head. "Secretaries are eight annas a dozen in Calcutta. They're a glut on the market," he said. "You'll starve to death."

"I won't starve," said Evelyn. "I have—other plans. Thank you for the nice, sanitary way you've done Harry Hoyt's dirty work. Good-bye."

Marvin gave the Sikh taxi-driver the address of Mrs. Pereira's *pension*. He stood a moment watching the taxi jerk into gear and rattle off in a cloud of hot dust. He could see the girl's little Bangkok hat above the back of the seat. Her head was still tilted at a proud, self-confident angle. It would be, he surmised, for another minute or so. She would wait until she was quite out of sight before giving way to her tears. . . .

CHAPTER III

LEE MARVIN, free, red-headed, and thirty-one, had come to India originally as a hunter of buried treasure. He had not come bearing a secret map, a story of long-dead pirates, and a pick-and-shovel. His equipment consisted of an education in mineralogy and a letter-of-credit from the hard-headed, long-armed firm of Orfèvre, Ltd., international jewellers of London, Paris, Amsterdam and New York. His treasure quest was some of the three billion dollars' worth of gold which India has swallowed up in past generations.

The Indian peasant shuns banks and puts his savings into gold bracelets, anklets, nose ornaments, toe rings, and ear studs. When his anatomy provides no more room for his portable wealth, he buys gold and buries it. When half the world began to slide off the gold standard and the price of the yellow metal started climbing, gold began to come out of the ground in India. And Orfèvre, Ltd., sent Lee Marvin out to buy it.

Marvin also had his eye out for fine examples of native craftsmanship—the artistic product of the skilled jewellers of Bhutan and the filigree gold of Cuttack. He made occasional trips to the bazaars of Delhi and Jaipur to buy *champlevé* enamel, and once a year he went south to cross Adam's Bridge into Ceylon for moonstones, cat's eyes, and star sapphires. His headquarters, however, were in Calcutta, where he was known not so much for his shrewd knowledge of gems and precious metals, but for an unusual capacity for minding his own business. It was therefore something of an event when Marvin abandoned his life-long policy

of *laissez-faire* to take an active and voluntary hand in the case of Harrison J. Hoyt and Evelyn Branch.

Hardly had Evelyn disappeared from view of the Kidderpore docks than Marvin jumped into a taxi and had himself taken to the Grand Hotel. Antoinette Vrai was stopping there with her father until after the wedding.

It is doubtful whether Antoinette was more surprised to see Marvin standing outside the door of her suite than Marvin was to be there. There had never been any love lost between the two, and there was a tacit mutual acknowledgment of the antipathy.

"*Tiens !*" said Antoinette. "It is the carrot-top. Come in."

Antoinette Vrai was wearing a flame-coloured negligee that needed cleaning. She was a small, bulbous person with curly black hair that radiated from her head like the coiffure of a Zulu queen. She was attractive in a forthright, physical way. Coarse eager lips ; high, pale cheekbones ; narrow, halfmoon eyes that alternately flashed with quick passion or dulled to an apathetic grey under eyebrows plucked and resketched into diabolic upward curves. There was something violently female about Antoinette, something at once repellant and fascinating, something elemental and obvious that would appeal to a man like Harrison J. Hoyt, but not, Marvin believed even at this late date, to the point of marriage. It wasn't necessary to marry Antoinette.

"Sit down, Carrot-top," said Antoinette, as she closed the door.

Marvin complied. As he did so, he could see into an adjoining room, where Jacques Vrai, Antoinette's father, lay asleep under a fan, clad only in a pair of drill trousers that were cut high enough to serve as cummerbund. He was lying with his head toward Marvin, who

noted that the close-cropped hair was black except for a touch of steel at the temples. The man must have married young to be Antoinette's father, for he could not be more than forty-two or three, despite his thin, hard-bitten features which added ten years to his appearance.

"Well?" said Antoinette. She sat down opposite Marvin, inserted a long Russian cigarette in a longer holder, and lit it. She crossed her hands behind her head and leaned back. The loose sleeves of her negligee fell away from her plump white arms, disclosing luxuriant axillary darkness. "Why are you here? Maybe you would like to stop the wedding, Yes?"

"I would," said Marvin, speaking for the first time.

Antoinette threw back her head and laughed out tenuous clouds of smoke. There was nothing reserved or dainty about her laugh. In the next room, Jacques Vrai stirred in his sleep.

"I believe you are jealous, Carrot-top," said Antoinette with a sidelong, teasing glance. "After all, you knew me before Harry. *Tiens*, you introduced us; no?"

"Yes, unfortunately," said Marvin. He had met Antoinette three years ago at Chandernagore, that anachronistic enclave, the last vestige of ancient French power in Bengal, twenty miles up the river from Calcutta. Jacques Vrai ran the *Hôtel Dupleix et de l'Univers* at Chandernagore. At least, he was the nominal manager. He did keep a suspicious eye on the accounts, but his tight-lipped, monosyllabic personality was a detriment to the hotel, rather than an asset. It was the loud and effusive gaiety of Antoinette which had always dominated the *Hôtel Dupleix et de l'Univers*. It was Antoinette who attracted week-end guests from Calcutta, Antoinette who kept the bar, and Antoinette who taught the Bengali cook how to make Poulet Marengo and Haricot de Mouton Bretonne. And it was

the Poulet Marengo, rather than Antoinette, which had started Lee Marvin staying at Chandernagore when he was on a tour of gold-buying in up-river villages.

"Does Harry Hoyt know you came to see me now?" asked Antoinette.

"He does not. He wouldn't understand my motive. But I think you will—because you are, after all, a woman. Did you know that Harrison Hoyt had a fiancée in the States?"

Antoinette filled her lungs with smoke before she replied.

"I think I remember some silly story like that," she said carelessly. "Puppy-love. Long ago and far away."

"The story is not silly," said Marvin soberly. "The girl is in Calcutta—now!"

Antoinette quickly unclasped her hands. She snatched the cigarette holder from between her teeth. She stood up.

"When she arrived?" she demanded.

"This afternoon. Her name is Evelyn Branch, and——"

"And you think I should stand aside, give up Harry, make way for this silly girl from America?"

"It would be the decent thing to do. This girl has a prior claim on Hoyt. She came here only because he let her believe he still loved her and was going to marry her. She——"

Antoinette exploded into loud laughter. Clutching the yawning front edges of her flame-coloured negligee, she laughed until she had to sit down. It was not stage laughter, either. It was good, hearty, sadistic laughter that came from a deep-seated enjoyment of the plight of this girl who had come all the way to India to find her marriage broken. It was laughter that caused tears to roll down her cheeks. She gasped for breath, showing plainly the wide space between her upper front teeth.

She laughed until Jacques Vrai came in from the next room, complaining under his breath.

"*Ecoute, Papa,*" gasped Antoinette. "*Il est trop rigolo, ce monsieur. Il me raconte . . . il me raconte . . .*"

And she started to laugh again.

Jacques Vrai stared suspiciously at Marvin for a moment, scratching his bare and perspiring stomach. He had been sleeping on one forearm, and the pressure of his wrist had left a vivid red mark across his scaly, grub-white face. His lips, too, were bloodless. The end of his nose was beet coloured.

Vrai grunted something that sounded like "Bonjour," and turned his back on Marvin. From a table he picked up a package of woolly French tobacco and started rolling a cigarette.

Marvin waited until Antoinette's laughter had subsided. Then he said :

"I see I am wasting my time."

"Not at all," said Antoinette. "I enjoy you immensely. But you cannot expect me to give up Harry. What does Harry say?"

"You know very well what Hoyt would say. What sort of hold have you got on him, anyhow?"

"Hold? Only that he loves me."

"Nonsense. Hoyt doesn't love any one but himself."

"That is not nice to say. Of course Harry loves me. He thinks I can kiss better than any one in the world. What do you think, Carrot-top?"

Marvin picked up his topee.

"Then you don't want to see Miss Branch?" he asked.

"Miss Branch? Who is Miss Branch? Oh, yes, of course. Harry's ex-fiancée. How stupid. Why, of course I would like to see her. Why don't you bring her to the wedding to-morrow?"

"Good-bye," said Marvin.

He slammed the door as he went out.

CHAPTER IV

HARRISON HOYT's bachelor dinner was held in one of Peliti's upstairs rooms, with planks set on horses in the anteroom as a private bar. There was such a crowd in front of the bar by the time Lee Marvin arrived that he could barely see the red turbans of the four dusky, bewhiskered barmen who were busily setting up the *chota wallas*. Marvin stood looking at the motley collection of dinner clothes—white trousers with black jackets, white mess jackets with black trousers, a few white serge tuxedos. As he elbowed his way through them, he caught sight of Hoyt at the opposite end of the bar. He started toward him, but stopped when he noticed that Hoyt was drinking with a man whose bronzed, square-jawed, sweat-spangled face was vaguely familiar. Where had he——? Of course. Colonel Linnet, who had spoken to Evelyn Branch in the customs shed that afternoon.

Hoyt and Linnet were drinking gin and bitters. They downed two rounds before Hoyt saw Marvin and came over.

"Howdy," said Hoyt. "Is Ahmed Ali Gannymede taking care of you?"

"Plenty," Marvin replied. "Who's the chap you were just drinking with?"

"That's George Linnet," said Hoyt.

"I know his name. But what's he doing here?"

"Oh, he sort of invited himself."

"Invited himself? Don't you know him, then?"

"I've corresponded with him," said Hoyt. "He's a client of mine, in a way. I . . . I had to let him come. Do you know him?"

Marvin looked up to see Linnet staring at him with the same cocksure insolence he had noted that afternoon, so Marvin did a little staring on his own account. With frank curiosity he studied the determined outlines of Linnet's face, the straight nose, the firm, ruthless mouth. It was an outdoor face, yet queer little lines at the corners of his eyes baffled Marvin. They gave Linnet a cruel, relentless expression. Marvin found it difficult to keep his eyes from focusing on Linnet's grey glove and the wooden immobility of the left hand. At last he turned back to Hoyt.

"I've met Linnet," said Marvin at last. "He came in on the same boat with Evelyn Branch this afternoon."

Hoyt gave a short laugh.

"I'd forgotten to ask you about Evelyn," he said. "How is she?"

"She's charming," said Marvin.

"Was she . . . did she make a fuss?"

"No," said Marvin. "She's a lady."

"That's good. I'm glad she didn't make a fuss," said Hoyt. "Where is she? The Grand?"

"No," said Marvin. "Mrs. Pereira's boarding house on Guru's Lane."

Hoyt seemed suddenly to lose all interest in the subject of Evelyn Branch. He leaned toward Marvin and began earnestly:

"Listen, Lee. I want you to do something for me. Will you——?" He stopped. He was staring across the room. Without moving his head, and almost without moving his lips, he murmured: "Not now, Lee. Later."

Marvin's eyes followed Hoyt's. Half-way across the room, resplendent in a turban of Benares gold cloth, stood Chitterji Rao, his upper lip curled slightly, his bulging eyes watching Harrison Hoyt with sinister insistence.

"That's another guy that shouldn't be here," murmured Hoyt in Marvin's ear. Then he moved away.

Marvin ordered another gin and bitters. The guests were downing drinks at such a rate that one sensed a fear that the liquor might run out. One sensed another sort of fear, too. A strange, intangible, vague sort of fear that everybody would have denied, but which everybody seemed to feel. The guests were getting noisier as they emptied the stock of gin and vermouth and whisky, but they were not getting jovial. Voices were raised, but they were strained voices. Something was strangling the usual conviviality of a bachelor's farewell to single blessedness. What was it?

The people, Marvin thought. They were a strange lot. There was Linnet, for instance, again drinking gin and bitters with Hoyt; and there was Henry Kobayashi, the Hawaiian-born Japanese, a little flushed, hovering in the background, waiting to buttonhole some one to listen to his limericks. Marvin didn't know many of the other guests. He knew Kurt Julius, of course, the plump, red-faced wild-animal buyer, who made most of his deals in the Grand Hotel bar but who talked like a mighty hunter. And he knew Rufus Dormer, the scrawny, sharp-eyed, bitter-tongued sub-editor of the *Anglo-Bengal Times*, the champion sneerer of Calcutta. Of the others, he knew vaguely that they were book-makers, a jockey or two, a retail liquor dealer, a Parsi theatrical manager, a manufacturer of artificial pearls.

On the tables in the adjoining room were place cards for more stodgily respectable guests who had also been invited. Fenwick, the jute broker, for instance; Major Cotton and Mr. Justice Hope. Marvin knew they would not come. It was worth a man's membership in the Bengal Club to be seen at a dinner like this.

The dinner itself was an insult to no man's palate. There was sherry with the soup, a dry Rhine wine with

the fish, and a very decent Bordeaux with the fowl. There was also the first onslaught of the green flies, massing for an attack on the lights, and dropping to the table in unwelcome numbers. And, with the serving of the third course, there was an odd interruption.

A *khidmatgar* leaned over Harrison Hoyt's shoulder and said something in Hindustani. Without an apology Hoyt arose quickly, walked from the room. From his own seat at the table Marvin could see Hoyt pass the bar and pause at the top of the stairway to talk to some one. The man talking to Hoyt remained half-hidden in the stairway. For an instant he thought he recognised him as Jacques Vrai, father of the bride, but he couldn't be sure from the one fleeting glimpse. Almost immediately afterward Hoyt returned to the dining room. Marvin thought he was pale.

Hoyt, instead of going to his own place, came directly to Marvin's. Standing very close to him, he leaned over his shoulder and whispered :

"Put your hand under the table, Lee, and take the package I'm holding. Keep it out of sight. Put it in your pocket when you get a chance. And for God's sake don't let it get away from you. Can't tell you any more now. Meet me at my flat at midnight."

Marvin opened his mouth to protest, but Hoyt shoved a thin flat parcel between his knees and went back to his chair across the table. Marvin felt the other guests looking at him : Kurt Julius, belligerently ; George Linnet, curiously ; Chitterji Rao, stonily ; Rufus Dormer, cynically ; Henry Kobayashi winked. Under the table Marvin reached for the package. It had hard corners, like a small box. He lifted it under cover of his napkin, pretended to wipe his mouth, and slipped the box into his breast pocket. Eyes were still on him. He had fooled no one, he was sure. What the dickens was in that box, anyway ? The Bosa pearl ?

Not the right shape. What was Hoyt getting him into now? For the second time that day, Marvin wished fervently that he did not owe his life to Harrison Hoyt. . . .

The dinner progressed. There was frozen punch and salad and dessert. The guests were getting boisterous. Champagne corks popped. George Linnet was leading an impromptu quartette at his end of the table. Men were leaving their seats to move about. Henry Kobayashi was being very American. A tipsy jockey crowned Rufus Dormer with a wreath of table decorations. The turbaned *khidmatgars* bustled through a haze of tobacco smoke, removing dishes, pouring champagne. Some one was saying something in a thick voice. Who was it? Marvin craned his neck.

Kurt Julius, the animal buyer, was on his feet. His normally florid face was scarlet with food and drink. He held a goblet in his hand.

"A toast," he was saying, "to the groom. We wish him——"

He stopped suddenly, staring toward the centre of the table. Marvin stared too. The groom was gone. Harrison Hoyt's chair was empty. Marvin had not seen him slip out.

"The groom," Kurt Julius continued, "seems to have escaped. We'll drink to him anyhow. To the groom."

He raised his goblet. The guests struggled to their feet. Some one started singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow. . . ."

Lee Marvin raised his hand to his breast to feel through his coat the corners of the box Hoyt had given him. He wondered where Hoyt had gone. . . .

CHAPTER V

MRS. PEREIRA'S boarding house for European Ladies and Gentlemen was a three-story house of a rather nauseous pink stucco, with faded green shutters. It was located on Guru's Lane, which runs between Elliots Road and Ripon Street—a neighbourhood in Calcutta in which threadbare European respectability struggles valiantly to keep its head above the encroaching orientalism of squalid, lop-sided native *bhustees*. To what extent Mrs. Pereira's boarders were full-blooded European ladies and gentlemen, was beyond the unpractised eye of Evelyn Branch to detect. For 120 rupees a month Mrs. Pereira would not discriminate between a country-born son of a country-born Scottish railway engineer and a Eurasian stenographer—provided the Eurasian had a European name and was not too dark. And all Evelyn Branch could tell about her companions at the dinner table was that they seemed a particularly undernourished lot of swarthy young men, and dark, scrawny young women, all of whom spoke English incessantly with a peculiar sing-song intonation and a sometimes startling pronunciation. They were a uniformly dismal group, and Evelyn wished, for a moment while she was toying with a dessert that had the consistency and flavour of library paste, that she had listened to Lee Marvin and gone to a hotel. Immediately after dinner she went to her room.

"A nice, cheerful room," Mrs. Pereira had assured her, yet for the moment nothing could be more utterly lonely, more drearily barren of all cheer. The floor was a mosaic of broken porcelain imbedded in

cement. A ceiling fan (five rupees per month supplement), droned mournfully as it stirred up feeble eddies of sticky, warm air. The mosquito bar draped above the white iron bedstead reminded her painfully of a discarded wedding veil. A chameleon made small clucking noises as it ran along the picture moulding, stalking the cloud of green flies swirling about the wan and sickly light globe. Outside the window a hundred huge black crows were settling for the night in a tree, with much uneasy, lugubrious cawing. Evelyn flung herself on the bed and wept for sheer loneliness.

How long she lay on the bed she did not know. She was finally aroused, not because by any Pollyana formula she had lifted herself from the bitter depths of despair, but because she was primarily a realist. She knew that the problems of life were not solved by tears, however sincere, however spectacular. And weeping would not wash out the fact that she was face to face with a problem.

She stepped into the musty-smelling bathroom, dipped some cold water from the tall Java bath jar, and washed her smarting eyes. Then she busied herself unpacking. She had hung away most of her wardrobe, when she discovered, at the bottom of her trunk, two books she did not remember were there. What unrealised premonition had caused her to bring *Advanced Stenography* and *Manual of Speed Practice* to India with her, she did not know. But she was glad she brought them. She might be looking for a job pretty soon. Unless . . .

That was a big "unless." Would she have the courage to go to Harry Hoyt in a few days after she was used to the idea of his being married—to some one else? If she was the practical person she thought she was, she would not hesitate. After all, there were more sides to her friendship with Harry Hoyt than the

sentimental. She was, in a way, a business associate. Would she be able to put the whole thing on that basis, forget her pride, the emotional numbness that had followed the first painful shock?

She fumbled in her suitcase for a packet of Hoyt's letters, read through them hurriedly, searching for the ones in which he spoke of his schemes for making them both very wealthy. . . .

Suddenly she looked up, startled. She seized her handbag, stuffed the bundle of letters into it. Some one had knocked on her door—or had she dreamed it? She glanced at her wrist-watch. Nearly midnight. Who could be calling on her at this hour?

The knock was repeated. Evelyn stood up, hesitant. She thought she knew who stood outside the door. It must be the tall, serious-faced red-head who had met her at the dock, Lee Marvin. Because he was a friend of Harrison Hoyt's, she did not want to see him again—yet. But because of something in his steady blue eyes, something friendly in the hostile sound and clutter of a strange city, she did want to see him. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to talk to any one—merely to hear the sound of her own voice.

"Come in," she said.

The door swung open. Evelyn felt her knees grow weak, her heart beat violently in her throat. Harrison J. Hoyt stood in the doorway.

Evelyn stared, her lips parted. Hoyt stepped across the threshold, closed the door behind him. His weak chin jutted forward in a semblance of strength. His dark eyes glowered with a queer, mad desperation. His black, curly hair was plastered flat by perspiration.

"So you didn't trust me?" he blurted with incredible venom. "So you couldn't wait until I sent for you? You had to come out and see what I was doing, if I was still true to you. Is that it?"

Evelyn said nothing. She stood on the same spot, in the same posture, as when he had opened the door. She was unable to move, or to speak.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied!" he shouted, almost in her face. "It serves you right."

Then Evelyn smiled. She saw suddenly that all this bluster and antagonism was the defence of a terribly weak and terribly guilty ego that sought self-justification.

"Sit down, Harry," she said.

Instantly all aggressiveness went out of Harrison Hoyt's face. He collapsed, rather than sat, on the edge of the bed. He ran his short, stubby fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry, Ev," he said abjectly into his hands. "I didn't come here to yell at you. I came to tell you that I've . . . that I'm sorry."

Evelyn moved at last. She approached Hoyt, stretched out her hand to touch his bowed shoulders, then instinctively drew back her fingers. She smiled again, wistfully.

"That's all right, Harry," she said. "I had a nice trip out, anyhow."

Harrison Hoyt raised his head to look at her. The hot, thick silence seemed to swirl about him, like the air stirred faintly by the whining fan. The chameleon scurried across the ceiling, with a series of tiny chirping sounds. And the feeling of agonised self-pity dropped from Evelyn Branch's shoulders like an outworn cape. For she knew then, with a sudden sense of shock and relief, that she was glad, very glad, that she was not going to marry Harrison Hoyt.

The sight of her ex-fiancé completely cured her heart-ache. She did not love him. She could not love a perfect stranger, and this Harrison Hoyt was an entirely different person from the boy she had come out

to marry. He was a stranger, yet a stranger with whom she had a mutual friend—a Harrison Hoyt who was young, breezy, clever, and pleasantly irresponsible, quite unlike this crass, smug and brutally vulgar Harrison Hoyt, whose soul seemed to have died in him. He was a stranger for whom she had the utmost sympathy and pity, because he was supremely unhappy. Her woman's eyes knew at once that he had not come here to-night to apologise ; he had come to unburden himself to an old friend, perhaps to ask a favour.

"Harry," she said softly, "you're in trouble."

All the abjectness went out of Hoyt's face. His lips stiffened. His eyes were again suspicious and hostile.

"I'm not," he said curtly, scarcely opening his mouth.

At last Evelyn laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Harry, this girl you're going to marry to-morrow, is she—Do you love her?"

"I'm going through with it," said Hoyt.

"That's silly, Harry, if you don't—"

"It's not silly." Hoyt sprang to his feet. "And I'm going through with it!"

He stood a moment facing Evelyn. Then with a brusque movement he crushed her in his arms, kissed her briefly, impetuously, turned and fled. The door slammed after him.

Evelyn stared at the door. Above the plaintive hum of the fan she heard his footsteps running downstairs. She opened the door.

"Harry!" she called.

There was no answer.

Without a second's hesitation, she ran down the stairs after him. He was in trouble ; he had come for her help, and was reluctant to ask it, after what he had done to her. But she was still his friend, even if she did not love him. She would help him.

The street door was open. She started out, then pulled back in terror. A figure rose up before her, the figure of a bearded man who saluted and mumbled sleepily in Hindustani. It was the *durman* who slept outside the entrance nightly. Evelyn did not know that, but she dashed past him—for she had just seen Harrison Hoyt running down Guru's Lane, turning the corner into Elliots Road.

Evelyn ran after him.

CHAPTER VI

INSPECTOR LEONIDAS M. PRIKE, C.I.D., was reading the *Statesman* as he slowly ate his *chota hazri*. As usual, his appointment as chief inspector was not yet listed in the official gazette column. Made acting chief inspector after his swift solution of the murder of Sir Anthony Daniels aboard the Bombay Mail, he had been waiting a good many months for his promotion to be gazetted. However, he had been in the service long enough to be able to smile tolerantly at the tedious unwinding of official red tape.

As he sipped his tea, waiting for his bearer to prepare his bath, Prike was clad only in a crimson *dhoti*—a ceremonial loin-cloth presented to him by the Brahmans of Bisewar Temple in Benares, after his recovery of the sacred treasure stolen from that Hindu Holy of Holies. When he turned the pages of his newspaper the ripple of muscles beneath the firm skin of his bare torso indicated the development and agility of a man fifteen years his junior—although Inspector Prike was not as old as his prematurely bald head might lead a stranger to surmise. The muscles of his intelligent face, on the other hand, appeared to have been trained to expressionless immobility. Only his alert eyes, the colour of gun-metal, occasionally betrayed a flicker of emotion—an understanding blur of tolerance, a flash of quick anger, a shadow of disbelief. He had the earnest lips of a scholar, the strong chin of a dogged fighter, the slightly-beaked, inquisitive nose of a good detective.

There were two items in the morning paper that were of particular interest to Inspector Prike. One was an

announcement that the Maharajah of Jharnpur had arrived in Calcutta for the "cold weather" and was reopening his palace in the suburb of Alipore. The other was a Reuter's dispatch from Singapore to the effect that Straits police had seized a Japanese vessel with a cargo of five thousand Japanese-made machine guns; some irregularity in the ship's clearance papers made the ship's destination obscure although the Straits police suspected her to be bound for Madras or Calcutta; there were no clues as to the identity of the consignees, the ship's officers maintaining that they were to have received instructions by radio later. . . . Inspector Prike chuckled to himself as he read the Singapore dispatch. Too bad the Japanese freighter had not been allowed to drop anchor in the Hooghly. The inspector fancied he would have better luck tracing the consignee of the machine guns than had the Straits police.

The inspector was so engrossed in his newspaper that he was unaware of the discordant chorus of *bikhri-wallas* outside his window. Even among the mansions of Lower Circular Road these half-naked, brown hawkers managed to get into the courtyard and shout their wares to the discomfiture of any one foolish enough to want to sleep past six-thirty in the morning. It was now past nine, and a chutney vendor, a fortune teller, and an itinerant cobbler were all yelling in falsetto under Prike's window. The inspector read on. Then his telephone rang.

"Prike speaking," said the inspector, as he picked up the instrument. "Who . . . ? Why don't you send a deputy from the Bow Bazaar *thana*. You don't want me . . . See here, I'm going off on a holiday this evening. . . . Puri. . . . I won't be back until after the *Poojas* are over, so you'd better— What? Well, it's not the first time a bridegroom has been late

for his own wedding in Calcutta. Probably had a drop too much at his bachelor dinner and . . . Harrison Hoyt? The chap I'd been investigating in regard to the . . .? What church was that, again? Dharmtolla Street . . .? Very well, I'll go right over."

In a few minutes Inspector Prike was converted from a bald *flâneur* in a red loin-cloth to a dynamic officer of the British Indian Criminal Investigation Department. A small man, he was nevertheless a brisk, impressive figure in his white drill trousers, black alpaca coat, and khaki topee. His walk epitomised energy and authority as he stepped into the taxi that his bearer had summoned to the compound of the flats.

The taxi rolled into Lower Circular Road, sped north to Dharmtolla Street, stopped in front of a small and unfashionable church. About the entrance to the church stood a motley group of Europeans and Westernised Orientals. Across the street was a turbaned crowd of brown men, their lips red from chewing areca nut, watching with eyes as round and expressionless as those of the sacred bull that sauntered among them. Prike jumped from the taxi.

A European constable stepped up to him.

"Glad you're here, inspector," said the constable. "Still no signs of the bridegroom."

Inspector Prike nodded curtly in reply. He was studying the group of wedding guests, who stood about awkwardly, talking in unnatural tones that betrayed their tense uneasiness. A small, scrawny European, with a dirty topee and whites that were frayed at the seams, came forward as Prike approached. The inspector recognised Rufus Dormer, sub-editor of the *Anglo-Bengal Times*.

"Hello, Dormer," said Prike. "You here professionally, or as a wedding guest?"

"I'm the wedding guest," said Dormer, fingering the dark, moth-eaten moustache that straggled along his upper lip, "but I've not been waylaid by the ancient mariner."

"When was Hoyt last seen?" asked Prike soberly.

"He disappeared from his bachelor dinner last night," said Dormer, with a cynical smile. "If you ask me, you'll find him tanked up somewhere in Karaiya Road. I'd suggest Madame Karnoff's. . . ."

"The Thanadar has had men making the usual search for the past hour," interrupted the European constable. "They haven't found the slightest trace."

Again Prike nodded. His alert gaze continued to detail the guests. He knew most of them—racing people, an Eurasian pearl dealer, two Paris theatre owners, a plump Bengali Babu with a black umbrella, looking very uncomfortable in European clothes and a celluloid collar, whom Prike knew was clerk in Harrison Hoyt's office. Standing a little apart from the group was the resplendent Chitterji Rao, the Maharajah of Jharnpur's household officer, and two A.D.C.'s of the Maharajah's staff.

"Who's the very loud gentleman wearing one grey glove?" Prike suddenly asked Dormer.

"Some American friend of Hoyt's," Dormer replied. "Name's Linnet, I think. Just arrived yesterday."

"And the tall, red-headed chap talking to Kurt Julius?"

"That's Lee Marvin, the best man."

In three quick strides, Inspector Prike was standing between Marvin and Kurt Julius. The wild-animal buyer greeted him vociferously, slapped him on the back, introduced him to Marvin. The inspector nodded his response to greeting and introduction, but did not remove his hands from the pockets of his black alpaca coat. He seemed particularly interested in the face of

Lee Marvin, which was tired, almost haggard, with dark pouches under the eyes.

Kurt Julius began a rapid and detailed recital of Harrison Hoyt's disappearance from his own bachelor dinner, how no one had seen him go, how his departure was not noticed until Kurt Julius himself had proposed a toast. . . .

"At what time was this?" asked Prike quietly, still watching Marvin.

"Eleven o'clock, maybe quarter-past," said Julius.

"And how much later did the party continue?" asked Prike.

"It didn't," said Julius. "Right away everybody went home."

"Every one but Mr. Marvin," suggested Prike. "Mr. Marvin doesn't seem to have had much sleep. Spend the night looking for your friend Hoyt, Mr. Marvin?"

Lee Marvin seemed disquieted by the persistent, searching gaze of Inspector Prike. He stammered slightly as he said:

"Well, yes, I—in a way."

"In what way, Mr. Marvin?" Prike's question was delivered in a calm undertone, yet the distinctness of his enunciation gave each word the sharpness of a steel blade.

"I . . . I had an appointment to meet Hoyt at his flat at midnight," said Marvin. "Naturally I went there to meet him."

"And Hoyt kept his appointment?"

"No, sir. He did not."

"How long did you wait for him?" asked Prike.

"About an hour. At least an hour."

"And no one came to Hoyt's flat during that time?"

"Mr. Hoyt did not come," said Marvin.

"I see. Some one else did. Who?"

"I'm not sure," Marvin replied. "Some one drove up in a closed third-class *ticca ghari* at about half-past twelve. It seemed to be Hoyt's Bengali clerk, Babu Gundranesh Dutt, but I wouldn't swear to it. He went away again almost immediately."

"You were inside the house at this time?"

"Well, no," Marvin admitted. "When Hoyt's bearer told me his master was not home yet, I didn't go in. I waited across the street."

"Why?"

"Well, I . . . I wasn't sure why Hoyt wanted to see me," said Marvin. "I thought I should like to be forewarned, if he were bringing some one else home with him."

"Who, for instance?"

"No one in particular," said Marvin. "But you know yourself, inspector, that Hoyt has a reputation for vaguely unsavoury dealings of one sort or another, and I was rather anxious not to become involved in any of them."

"I see. And at one o'clock you went home?"

"No. I went to the Grand Hotel. I thought Hoyt might be with his fiancée, Miss Vrai."

"And was he?"

"No. I haven't seen him since."

"But you've tried?"

"Yes. I went by on my way home, at about two o'clock. And I called again this morning, naturally."

"You have no idea where he might be?"

Marvin hesitated for a fraction of a second. Then he said:

"Not the slightest."

Prike took Marvin's arm and pushed him gently towards the entrance to the church.

"Let us interview the bride," he said.

Antoinette Vrai and her father were waiting in the

ante-room of the church. As Prike and Marvin paused outside the door, the voice of the jilted bride could be heard shrilly within. Hysterics, Prike thought to himself; tears all over the place; a decidedly unpleasant assignment. He opened the door.

If the sight that greeted him was a surprise, his stony, inexpressive features gave no sign of it. Instead of a weeping bride, he was confronted with a furious one. Antoinette Vrai had torn the bridal veil from her head and was shaking it in her clenched fist as she gesticulated almost under the nose of her father. Her curly black hair stood more erect than ever as she shouted in violent French.

Jacques Vrai, in an ill-fitting morning coat, paced the room slowly, ignoring the shouts of Antoinette. Half an inch of dead cigarette was flattened between his thin, bloodless lips, and his small, close-cropped head seemed almost lost in the high, wilted, gates-ajar collar several sizes too large for him.

When Prike and Marvin entered, Antoinette stopped suddenly in the middle of a high-pitched sentence, whirled, and glowered.

"Pardon this intrusion, Miss Vrai," said Prike quietly, "but I believe I may be able to help in clearing up the mystery of——"

"Mystery?" Antoinette threw back her head and uttered a shrill, mirthless laugh. "There is no mystery! He can tell you everything! He knows where is Harry Hoyt!"

She pointed an accusing finger at Lee Marvin. Undisguised hate blazed in her black eyes, and the very white teeth which flashed through the scarlet of her full, scornful lips, gleamed like the fangs of a wild animal.

"I've questioned Mr. Marvin," said Prike, unruffled by the woman's outburst, "and he says he knows nothing of——"

"He is a liar!" screamed the jilted bride. "Always he has tried to break my marriage with Harry Hoyt! He hates me! He has had his way at last! He is keeping my fiancé from me! *Tant pis pour lui!* He will be sorry! And you will be sorry! Go away from me, *chameau!* Go away! Tell all those people outside to go home!"

"I'll tell them the ceremony has been postponed. . . ."

"No! Tell them it is cancelled! Definitely! Come, papa!"

With a domineering gesture, Antoinette motioned Jacques Vrai to the door, and swept from the room after him.

Prike followed, with Marvin close behind. As they reached the steps of the church, they saw a *ticca ghari* drive up. It was a closed, third-class vehicle, like a shuttered packing-case on wheels. The be-whiskered *ghari-walla* reined in his boney horse and shouted something in Hindustani.

Instantly Inspector Prike sprang past Antoinette Vrai and her father, hurtled through the crowd, bounded down the church steps. The *ghari-walla* was still declaiming in Hindustani when Prike reached the closed carriage, seized the door handle, jerked it open.

A woman screamed.

A tallow-faced, glassy-eyed young man in evening clothes toppled stiffly from the *ghari* into the arms of Inspector Prike.

Prike lowered the young man carefully to the ground. One arm, pointing upward at a grotesque angle, vibrated rigidly in short, lifeless arcs.

Harrison J. Hoyt was quite dead.

CHAPTER VII

ACCORDING to the police surgeon, who arrived ten minutes later from the Bow Bazaar station, death was due to natural causes, but by that time Inspector Prike had made up his mind otherwise.

"The man was murdered," said Prike confidently.

"Nonsense," said the police surgeon, just a trifle more confidently. "There are no wounds, no marks of violence. The post-mortem appearances indicate some sort of cardiac seizure. Perhaps coronary thrombosis. Note the slight cyanosis of the face. . . ."

"Could the same symptoms be produced by poison, doctor?" asked the inspector.

"Well-I-ll, possibly," admitted the police surgeon. "But this man—What's his name? Hoyt?—has been dead at least eight or nine hours, judging from the advance of rigor mortis and the beginning of decomposition. You don't mean to tell me, inspector, that a man who has been poisoned would jump into a third-class *ghari* to die?"

"The poison was administered far in advance," declared Inspector Prike. "Isn't it true, doctor, that there is usually a delay of twelve to twenty-four hours in death from arsenic?"

"This is not a case of arsenic poisoning. There has been no vomiting. . . ."

"Nevertheless, you will make a most thorough autopsy?" asked the inspector.

"Of course, of course. But I am certain we will find a very ordinary case. . . ."

"I am just as certain you will not." Inspector Prike was not arguing; he was stating a fact. "Possibly

Harrison J. Hoyt's death may mark the unusual coincidence of a wish and an accident. But probably the long arm coincidence has been rudely jogged at the elbow."

"Good Lord, inspector." The police surgeon mopped his pink, perspiring brow. "Why this insistence on foul play?"

Inspector Prike thrust his hand into the pocket of his alpaca coat. His fingers grasped a silk handkerchief in which he had carefully wrapped two objects recovered from the floor of the *ghari* before the arrival of the surgeon. He was about to withdraw the handkerchief, then hesitated. He looked around at the grimly-silent group of wedding guests that a squad of red-turbaned *pahare-wallas* and European constables had herded back on to the steps of the church. Fifty eyes were watching him, eyes devoid of tears, curious eyes, yet eyes that were awed by the pitiful, inexorable evidence of mortality that lay stretched before them. Voices, even the shrilly hysterical voice of the bereft bride, were hushed in the presence of death. Only the whisper of bare feet on the hot pavement, the feet of half-clad Orientals straining against the police lines, their betel-red lips gaping, gawking at the corpse, violated the steamy stillness. Inspector Prike scanned the tense faces, pausing longest on the earnest, troubled features of the red-headed Lee Marvin. Then he removed his hand from his pocket—without the handkerchief and its contents. He turned back to the police surgeon.

"That, doctor," was the inspector's belated reply, "is exclusively my business. I would appreciate your occupying yourself solely with the business of removing the body and performing the autopsy."

With a nod, the inspector left the police surgeon to his task and walked slowly up the church steps.

Within half an hour, to the disconcerted amazement of Deputy Inspector Robbins from the Bow Bazaar station, Inspector Prike had dismissed the bride, her father, and the wedding guests after only the briefest and most cursory questioning. He did not even give Robbins instructions to have these people shadowed; he knew Robbins would do so anyhow, for Robbins distrusted the unorthodox detective methods of his superior and never failed to set the routine police machinery in motion loyally to cover up the apparent errors of Inspector Prike.

Prike did go so far as to detain the bearded *ghari-walla* who had driven the dead Harrison J. Hoyt to his wedding. The man's story seemed reasonable enough.

"I was driving slowly down Elliots Road," the *ghari-walla* said, "when this sahib who is now dead came running out of a side street, I think it was Guru's Lane, and shouted at me to stop. He kept shouting at me as he got into my *ghari*. I did not understand his directions very well, as he was out of breath and yelled very loud. However, he seemed in a great hurry and every word was, '*Jeldi!*' or '*Ek dum!*' so in order not to displease the sahib, I drove at great speed (for my horse) in the same direction. After perhaps five minutes I stopped to inquire the exact address. The sahib appeared to be quite drunk and spoke thickly. He said something about getting to a church for a wedding at nine o'clock the next morning. Then he went to sleep.

"At this point, O Huzur, I fear I yielded to temptation and acted in a manner for which I will suffer in my next incarnation. In fact I have acted in the same manner before when a sahib, befuddled with wine, has stumbled into my *ghari*. But I am a poor man, Huzur, and all sahibs are rich. I examined the sahib's pocket-book to see if it contained enough money to pay the

legal rate of twelve annas an hour for sleeping in my *ghari*. It did, so I drove to my home in Narkooldanga Road, left the *ghari* in the alley, unhitched the horse, and went to rest. I arose early this morning, saw that the sahib was still sleeping, and thought I would do him a favour by driving him to the wedding before awakening him. As I did not remember the name of the church, I drove from one *pardesi* church to the next, looking for one at which a *shadi* was being celebrated. The rest, Huzur, you know, for you saw me stop in Dharmtolla Street. I did not know the sahib was dead. I swear it. *Oasam khao*."

Prike was inclined to believe the story of the trembling, stammering *ghari-walla*. The man was frightened almost to the point of tears, yet the inspector's cross-examination could poke no holes in his statement. Moreover, Harrison Hoyt's money and his pearl shirt-studs had not been taken. Of course, it was possible that the *ghari-walla* had been so well paid for telling this story that he was not tempted by petty larceny. But Prike ordered him released; he could always put his hands on him if he wanted him later.

Then the inspector proceeded directly to the publicity offices of the late Harrison Hoyt in the Maidan Mansions.

In the outer office Prike found Babu Gundranesh Dutt seated at a desk, writing furiously. The Bengali clerk's massive head wagged ponderously as his pen scratched over the paper. When the inspector entered he looked up guiltily and immediately covered the writing with a piece of pink blotting-paper.

"What are you doing, Babu?" Prike asked quietly.

Gundranesh Dutt arose so quickly that he knocked over his chair.

"Nothing, Inspector Sahib," he protested. "I am just now writing chit to person who is friend of mine."

Prike extended his hand. "Could I see it please, Babu?"

"It is strictly quite personal matter, Inspector Sahib."

"Let me see it, please."

The Babu fumbled beneath the blotter. The fat hand which extended the sheet of note-paper shook violently. Prike read :

"DEAR MR. DORMER,

"I am requiring most urgently to see you this evening time. Reason therefore is no doubt quite transparent in view of catastrophe in Dharmtolla Street. Quite essential that situation be liquidated instantly.

"Most respectfully and obediently yours,
"GUNDRANESH DUTT."

Inspector Prike tossed the chit carelessly to the desk.

"What situation must be liquidated so urgently, Babu?"

"As heretofore stated, matter is quite personal, Inspector Sahib."

"How much do you owe Mr. Dormer, Babu?"

"Quite contrariwise, Inspector Sahib. I am being creditor of Mr. Dormer to extent of ten rupees."

Inspector Prike's eyebrows raised almost imperceptibly.

"What is your salary, Babu?" he asked.

"Have recently been increased to sixty-five rupees per mensem. However, in view of catastrophe to Mr. Hoyt, am facing possible period of unemployment. Am, therefore, seeking refund of outstanding accounts."

"Do you expect me to believe, Babu, that a man with your small salary is in the habit of lending money to Europeans?" the inspector demanded.

"Not in the habit, Inspector Sahib. However, Mr. Dormer was recently enjoying great economic distress which I was humbly able to alleviate from own sparse nest-egg."

If Inspector Prike had any particularly violent ideas on the subject of Europeans who borrow money from native clerks, he expressed them neither verbally nor facially. He merely nodded. Apparently the Dormer Dutt credit relationship was of no further interest to him. Suddenly he turned his head at a faint sound from the inner office.

"Who's in there, Babu?" His head gestured towards the door.

"No one, Inspector Sahib."

"How long have you been here?"

"Proceeded directly to this place following release from custody at church," said the Babu. "By the way Inspector Sahib, have police investigations yet revealed causes underlying death of my late employer, recently deceased?"

Inspector Prike did not reply. He walked briskly to the door of the inner office, flung it open.

A man, kneeling before a small safe in a corner of the room, arose quickly and turned to face him. The long tail of an almond-green turban was draped fan-wise over one shoulder of Chitterji Rao.

Without a word Inspector Prike strode up to the household officer of the Maharajah of Jharnpur. With deft fingers he explored the contours of the Hindu's long, black coat, tapping the pockets for non-existent bulges. Chitterji Rao's protruding eyes watched him with amused cynicism.

"What are you doing here?" Inspector Prike demanded.

"I am here in the service of His Highness." A humourless smile twisted the household officer's thin, dark lips.

"Why did the Babu tell me there was no one in this office?"

"He was not aware of my presence. I came in by the side door. Mr. Hoyt's private entrance."

"You have a key?"

"The door was open."

"Was the safe also open?"

Chitterji Rao's smile became a little broader, a little more disdainful,

"I know the combination," he said. "For some time His Highness and I have found it advisable to have access to Mr. Hoyt's safe—with Mr. Hoyt's consent, of course. As you doubtless know, His Highness has been pleased to employ Mr. Hoyt for maintaining contacts with the press."

"No doubt you opened the safe merely to look for newspaper cuttings," said the inspector gravely, his keen eyes searching the Hindu's features for any change of expression.

Chitterji Rao laughed. "Not at all," he said. "I was looking for a trinket that His Highness entrusted to Mr. Hoyt several days ago—a small piece of ceremonial jewellery that Mr. Hoyt persuaded His Highness to exhibit at some international exposition in California. In view of Mr. Hoyt's untimely death, I thought it best to reclaim the Maharajah's property and avoid possible complications with the executor of the dead man's estate."

Prike fixed Chitterji Rao with an expressionless stare for several seconds before speaking. Then he asked:

"And did you find the . . . trinket?"

"I did not. I recall now that Mr. Hoyt intended sending the trinket to California by registered post in yesterday's mail. Undoubtedly he has done so."

"In that case," said Inspector Prike, "you have no further business here."

"None whatever."

"Good afternoon, Chitterji Rao."

"Salaam, inspector."

The household officer touched the fingers of his right hand to his forehead three times in quick succession. The inspector nodded impersonally. Chitterji Rao left the room, walking backward, in the manner of an inferior leaving the presence of a prince. But the sarcastic smile still hovered about the corners of his mouth.

Before the outer door slammed, Prike was rapidly running through the contents of the safe. He seemed interested only in a receipt for two insurance policies of ten thousand dollars each, on which a loan had been made. A third policy for a thousand pounds sterling named as beneficiary, one Evelyn Branch. The inspector slipped the papers into his pocket and stepped to the desk.

For the next ten minutes Prike opened drawers and sorted papers. In the bottom drawer he found a leather frame which was mouldy, as was all leather that had been neglected during the mensum. Within the frame was a photograph of a rather pretty girl, with a *contre-jour* light that made a halo effect of her blonde hair. For a long moment he studied the high-lights on the full lips and the large, wondering eyes. Then he put down the photograph and took from his pocket a silk handkerchief, containing the two objects he had found in the *ghari* in Dharmtolla Street. Without touching the stub of a pencil, which lay half-hidden in the silken folds, he reread the few lines which had been scribbled on a soiled scrap of paper—the second of the two objects in the handkerchief. He could make out only, "Raffles 82335 he . . ." The rest was illegible.

Prike arose, carefully rewrapped the paper and pencil, and called into the next room :

" Babu, do you know the address of a man named Lee Marvin ? "

The Babu came forward almost obsequiously.

" Quite, Inspector Sahib, he is residing at number nineteen and one-half Theatre Road."

Inspector Prike replaced the handkerchief in his pocket.

" Thank you, Babu," he said. " Please call me a taxi."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN the body of Harrison J. Hoyt tumbled from the shabby *ghari* in Dharmtolla Street, the blood drained from Lee Marvin's sun-tanned face until it was nearly the colour of his freshly-chalked topee. He had never been shocked by the sight of death in the abstract, and he certainly felt no personal grief at the revelation that Hoyt's unsavoury career had come to a sudden end. He was not even surprised. Yet the apparition of Hoyt's corpse struck Marvin with the force and symptoms of a blast of May sun on his cervical vertabræ. Icy droplets oozed from his pallid forehead, chill moisture formed in the palms of his twitching hands. His knees flexed. His eyes closed for a brief instant—as though to shut out the realisation that he was surely and horribly involved in tragedy.

Marvin knew since last night that the tangled web of Hoyt's life, which he had been precariously skirting for more than a year, had finally enmeshed him. He sensed the fact when Hoyt had given him the small, flat package at the banquet table. After the bridegroom had disappeared from his own bachelor dinner, Marvin had gone to the rendezvous at midnight, determined to give up the package and make a definite break with Hoyt. Marvin waited until past one o'clock but Hoyt failed to appear. Marvin returned to his own flat, and for his own protection decided to open the package. When he saw the contents he knew he was in for it.

The package contained a flat ebony case with a nacre inlay of the crest of the Maharajah of Jharnpur surrounded by a quotation from the *Bhagavad Gita* in

Hindi characters of filagree gold. Marvin opened the case and his eyes bulged. Reposing on a tiny cushion of spun Benares silver was a flashing circlet of nine gems. Wonderingly, more than a little fearfully, Marvin lifted the ornament from its case. Simply-mounted in the traditional manner of Hindu craftsmen, were a pale-yellow diamond as big as his thumb-nail, a pigeon's blood ruby, a sky-blue sapphire, a flawless emerald, a topaz, a jacinth, and a Ceylonese cat's eye, fastened with a huge coral clasp and tipped with a pendant of a pear-shaped pearl!

Marvin turned the jewels over in the palms of his hands. The light from his desk-lamp struck fire from the heart of the ruby, flung brilliant, trembling reflections into his astounded face from the facets of the great diamond, coaxed into life the satiny, iridescent lustre of the pearl. It was the pearl that fascinated Marvin. The other gems were worth a small fortune, but the pearl, a hundred grains of shimmering beauty, was worth as much as all of them together. He knew its value from having seen it once in Bombay, just before its purchase by the Maharajah of Jharnpur. It was the Bosa pearl.

Marvin bent closer over the oddly-assorted jewels and frowned. He recognised the ensemble as a *nao-ratna*, a nine-jewel talisman mounted in accordance with Vedantic astrology, which rich and pious Hindus offer to a temple when they wish to curry favour with some particular god. For what great undertaking was the Maharajah of Jharnpur seeking divine protection, that he had included so valuable a gem as the Bosa pearl in his votive offering? How had the *nao-ratna* come into Hoyt's possession? What was his true relationship with the Maharajah? Why had Hoyt been so desperately anxious to get rid of the gem, so frantically furtive in passing them to Marvin at the banquet-

table? Had the rendezvous at midnight been intended for detaching the Bosa pearl from the talisman and selling it to Marvin, as he had promised? Why had Hoyt failed to keep the rendezvous?

Whatever the answers to these questions which surged through Marvin's bewildered mind, there was no doubt about the exciting fact that the Bosa pearl was in his possession. His first impulse was to hurry to his office and put the *nao-ratna* into the safe of Orfèvre, Ltd. On second thought he decided against involving his firm, until he was sure he was not handling stolen property. He could not take the gems back to Hoyt, because Hoyt's flat had been locked tight. To return them directly to the Maharajah of Jharnpur might involve him in some unknown and dangerous intrigue. To take them to the police would be ridiculous should Hoyt's possession of them prove legitimate. And, since he certainly was not going to toss the Bosa pearl into the dustbin, he decided to hide the precious case until he knew more of its history.

Slowly, methodically, Marvin strolled through the three rooms of his bachelor flat, examining possible places of concealment, carefully weighing their merits and the chances of discovery. The steel engraving of the Battle of Plassey on the wall of his bedroom. The mattress? Too obvious. The chest of drawers? His bearer would probably be rummaging among his linen, looking for buttons to sew on. He finally decided on the gramophone in his living-room, a tall mahogany cabinet standing next to the window that looked out on Theatre Road through the heavy foliage of a mango tree. Opening the back of the cabinet, Marvin tucked the ebony jewel-case between the motor and the flaring cone of the dynamic speaker, closed the panel, and pushed the instrument back against the wall. . . .

The whole mad sequence of last night's events

rushed back upon Marvin as he stood upon the steps of the church in Dharmtolla Street, nervously mopping the cold perspiration from his face, staring at the dead body of Harrison Hoyt. The brutal realisation that he could now never extricate himself from the mystery of the *nao-ratna* by the simple expedient of returning it to Hoyt, filled him with panic near. Even a lifetime of methodical scientific thinking could not relieve the anxious hours that followed, hours spent in pacing the ante-room of the little church awaiting his turn to be questioned by Inspector Prike. Even the casual and cursory nature of the inspector's examination did not reassure him. The very calmness of the precise little detective's apparently off-hand questions alarmed him. He felt definitely that the inspector's suave, impersonal manner was like the innocent-looking sheep-skin scabbard that sheathed the sharp, murderous knife of the Gurka. When Prike thanked him and informed him politely that he was free to do as he pleased, he knew that this was merely the beginning.

Marvin caught a taxi not far from the church and gave his address to the bewhiskered driver. He had hardly turned the corner of Wellington Street, however, before he leaned forward to countermand his directions.

"Guru's Lane *jao ! Jeldi !*" he now ordered.

He must see Evelyn Branch. It would seem that he was to be the perpetual bearer of unpleasant tidings to Evelyn Branch, but this time, at least, he was acting on his own volition. The girl, friendless in Calcutta, should not be allowed to learn of Hoyt's death through the newspapers, brutally, without preparation. Some one ought to break the news to her, and since Marvin was the only person who knew where she was, he did not hesitate to assume the task himself. Besides, the girl should be warned that there might be trouble if Inspector Prike discovered that Harrison Hoyt's

jilted fiancée had arrived in India on the eve of his murder.

Marvin dismissed the taxi at the corner of Elliots Road and walked down Guru's Lane to Mrs. Pereira's boarding-house. For ten minutes he breathed the musty atmosphere of Mrs. Pereira's parlour before Evelyn Branch received him upstairs.

She greeted him with a curt nod. There was still cautious doubt in the contour of her full lips, yet some indefinable change had taken place in the girl since Marvin had last seen her. Perhaps the tilt of her blonde head was a trifle less proud, less defiant. Perhaps the expression in her grey-green eyes was a little less bewildered, less lonely. But she was not a whit less lovely.

"Have you come to report that Harrison is safely married?" she asked, with light sarcasm.

"Worse," said Marvin.

"Worse? What happened? Did he fall off the altar steps and break a leg?"

"Look here," said Marvin, trying to look solemn. He wasn't doing a very good job of preparation. "I'm sorry to be always bringing you bad news, but——"

"Don't tell me. Let me guess," said the girl gaily. "Is he dead?"

"Yes," said Marvin bluntly.

Evelyn Branch smiled incredulously. "Is this another of Harry's jokes?"

"It's a pretty grim joke," said Marvin. "The police think he's been murdered."

"Murdered?"

Little eddies of dust arose from Mrs. Pereira's red plush sofa as the girl sat down weakly. Her right hand made a futile gesture and dropped limply in her lap. She stared at Marvin as though she had not understood.

"He can't be dead," she said. "I saw him last night."

"You saw him?"

"Yes. He came here. At midnight."

"But he was to have met me at midnight. Why did he come here?"

The girl ignored the question. "How was he killed?" she asked, dry-eyed.

Briefly Marvin told of the arrival of the dead bridegroom at the church. A slight tremor of the girl's lips was her only reaction as she listened. She seemed remarkably self-possessed, under the circumstances. She had been remarkably self-possessed yesterday, too, when he told her that Hoyt was marrying Antoinette Vrai. Hadn't this girl any feelings? Or was she——

Marvin stood up, struck by sudden suspicion. What did he know about this girl anyhow, except that she was damned attractive and that he felt sorry for her? Did he know the true story of her relations with Hoyt, after all? Why, after his elaborate precautions not to meet Evelyn Branch at the boat, had Hoyt deliberately come to see her at midnight—instead of meeting Marvin? Perhaps it was the girl who prevented Hoyt from keeping his rendezvous. Perhaps there had never been any sentimental attachment between Hoyt and Evelyn Branch. Perhaps their engagement had been an invention of Hoyt's. . . . Marvin felt both disturbed and strangely elated by this last thought.

"I suppose," said Evelyn Branch, "that you're come to tell me I'd better get out of town."

"As a matter of fact, I was about to suggest it. You could go to Darjeeling for a week or so, until this thing blows over."

"I'm not going."

"If it's the financial side that worries you, I'm still ready to help out."

"Still trying out your rebound theories?"

"Look here." Abruptly Marvin reached down and seized the girl's shoulders. "You may not realise it, but you're heading for an awful jam. The investigation of Hoyt's death is going to raise some loud and unpleasant odours around here, and as long as no one knows you're in Calcutta, you may as well stay out of smelling range."

"Your interest in me is purely impersonal, of course." Evelyn arose and gently disengaged herself from Marvin's grasp.

"Of course it's not," said Marvin. "But it's honourable—for the moment. You don't know me well enough to trust me, but at least you have no reason to distrust me."

"Yes, I have," said the girl. "Why are you trying so hard to get rid of me?"

"I just told you——"

"Isn't it because of—the Bosa pearl?"

Marvin's teeth clicked. He stared, speechless with the surprise of hearing the girl mention the gem that had been so much on his mind these last hours. Evelyn laughed softly, not unpleasantly.

"You see," she said, "when you told me your name yesterday, it didn't mean anything. I was too upset by the news about Harry Hoyt. But last night, after I'd had a chance to collect my thoughts, I connected up everything. Harry Hoyt wrote me about you—Lee Marvin and Orfèvre, Ltd. Have you got the Bosa pearl?"

Marvin hesitated an instant. Then, "Yes," he said.

"I thought so. Are you going to keep it?"

"I . . . I don't know," said Marvin truthfully.

"And you expect me to trust you!"

"Is that why Hoyt came to see you last night—to tell you about the Bosa pearl?"

"The Bosa pearl wasn't even mentioned."

"You're not doing very much yourself to establish mutual confidence," said Marvin.

"Suppose you start the return of confidence by telling me your version of the story. Just how do you figure in Harry Hoyt's deal for the Bosa pearl?"

"I was about to ask you the same question. You seem to be in possession of more facts than I am."

"But you're in possession of the pearl," said Evelyn.

"Almost in spite of myself. Hoyt handed it to me last night a little while before he disappeared. He didn't get a chance to tell me a word about it, and I haven't the slightest idea of how he came to have it or what he expected me to do with it. That's the truth."

Evelyn Branch looked at him in silence for a moment. Then she walked slowly to the door, opened it.

"When you have a more plausible story," she said, "come back and tell it to me. Then I might believe that you're really trying to help a damsel in distress. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Marvin. He picked up his topee, bowed stiffly. "But I won't come back. I've already gone pretty far out of my way to be a good Samaritan, and it begins to look as though I'd taken the wrong turning. The next move is yours."

As he went down the steps, Marvin had a peculiar, empty feeling inside of him. It was damned unpleasant, this business of dusting off a pedestal for a subtly charming girl, only to find that the girl isn't at all what she seems. Evelyn Branch was certainly not the innocent, helpless little thing he had imagined. She was obviously very much in on the mystery of the Bosa pearl and the Maharajah's *nao-ratna* which now reposed behind the motor of Marvin's gramophone. Just as obviously, she was not going to talk about it. The problem, therefore, was exclusively Marvin's. He

hurried past the crooked, tile-roofed, mud-and-bamboo huts that lined Guru's Lane and hailed a taxi in Elliots Road.

When he reached his address in Theatre Road, another car was just drawing up in front of the house. While Marvin was paying the taxi-walla, a dynamic little European in white trousers, black alpaca coat and khaki sun-helmet leapt nimbly from the first car.

With a sinking sensation, Marvin recognised Inspector Prike.

CHAPTER IX

"WILL you have a drink, inspector?" asked Marvin, as he climbed the stairs to his flat with Prike.

"Thank you," said Inspector Prike, "a brandy peg. It might make our interview seem a little less—shall I say, 'formal'?"

"More questions, inspector?" asked Marvin as he opened the door into the second-story hallway.

"Several," said Prike. He removed his topee. The glistening arch of his bald head was dewy with perspiration.

"Anything I can do, inspector——" Marvin began.

"Yes, I know," Prike broke in, dryly, "you'll be glad to help."

The two men entered the living-room, Marvin looked about him anxiously. On the floor, near the window which looked out upon the mango tree and Theatre Road, were the shattered fragments of a phonograph record. Damn that bearer! How often did he have to tell him to be careful with records. Last week he had smashed the second movement of Beethoven's Fifth, and to-day—— Marvin bent down to look at the broken disc. *La Forza Del Destino*. Marvin glanced up. Prike was watching him sharply.

"Bearer!"

Instantly Marvin's white-bearded Mohammedan servant appeared in the doorway, adjusting his red turban.

"Sahib."

Marvin was about to read him the riot act on the subject of broken phonograph records but something in Prike's small, flinty eyes, which had never left him for a moment, changed his mind.

"*Do-to brandy peg lao*," he ordered simply. Then he sat down.

"Mr. Marvin, by any chance do you know a woman named Evelyn Branch?" the inspector asked without further preliminaries.

A spasm of cold gripped Marvin's viscera. He hesitated, then closed his eyes, as though trying to remember where he had heard the name before. Should he protect this headstrong girl, who had not only refused his protection, but who seemed to regard him as an adversary? Or should he tell Prike all he knew—which was little enough.

"I don't recall having heard of her," he said, after a pause.

"Let me describe her," prompted Prike. "She has light hair, slightly curly; and large, somewhat child-like eyes. Her lips, I should say, were rather less child-like—full, sensitive, with an expression that indicates considerable strength of character. Remember her?"

The arrival of the bearer, with brandy pegs, gave Marvin a short respite. Was Prike bluffing? His description fitted Evelyn Branch, true, but it was general enough to include half a dozen women of Marvin's acquaintance.

"I don't believe I know her," said Marvin. Slowly, deliberately he took his brandy peg from the tray. The ice tinkled as he raised his glass. "Cheerio," he said.

Prike did not touch his drink. "Evelyn Branch was a friend of Hoyt's." He pursued. "You must have heard him speak of her."

Marvin shook his head. "She couldn't have been a very close friend," he said.

At last Prike took a deep draught of his brandy and soda. "Are you sure of that?" he asked.

Marvin, too, took a swallow of brandy. What had

come over him, anyway, that he persisted in lying like this about Evelyn Branch? He couldn't be in love with the girl. Not after having seen her only twice. Not after the way she responded to his efforts to help. Still . . .

"Positive," he said.

Prike smiled. It was the wise, tolerant smile of a man whose career has been made up largely of listening to lies, so many lies that he was no longer annoyed when his infallible instincts announced the presence of a new one.

"In that case," he said, "don't you find it strange, Mr. Marvin, that, despite the fact that he was being married to a woman named Antoinette Vrai, his insurance should still be payable to Evelyn Branch."

Yes, Marvin did find it strange. In fact, he was slightly flabbergasted, although he made an effort not to show it. He was also a little relieved to know that Prike had probably learned of the existence of Evelyn Branch through Hoyt's insurance policy. Probably Prike didn't even know that the girl was in Calcutta. He would act on that assumption.

"Possibly she's a relative."

"Possibly," Prike echoed without conviction. He got up, crossed the room towards Marvin's chair and stood with one elbow resting on the gramophone.

"Do you know the Maharajah of Jharnpur, Mr. Marvin?"

"I do not." Marvin was so relieved at being able to tell the truth that his declaration carried the force of an important announcement.

"Or his household officer, one Chitterji Rao?"

"I have met him in Hoyt's office and again last night at the bachelor dinner, but I can't say I know him."

"What do you know about a piece of jewellery

belonging to the Maharajah of Jharnpur which Hoyt kept in his office safe ? ”

“ Nothing,” Marvin replied. Again he reached for his drink. He had difficulty in swallowing—but at least he knew what he was going to say next. He was through with subterfuge on this score. “ Unless,” he continued, “ you are referring to a *nao-ratna*, of which the Bosa pearl is a part.”

“ I fancy I am. What do you know about it ? ”

“ Nothing,” said Marvin, “ except that I have the *nao-ratna* here in my flat.”

“ Where did you get it ? ”

“ Hoyt gave it to me last night.”

“ Why ? ”

“ I was interested in buying the Bosa pearl for my firm, Orfévre, Ltd. I’d already paid Hoyt eight thousand rupees on account.”

“ I see. Was Hoyt the authorised agent of the Maharajah of Jharnpur in this matter ? ”

“ I don’t know. I would have found out, of course, before concluding the deal, in order to have clear title to the pearl.”

“ If the deal was not concluded, how is it that you have the *nao-ratna* in your possession now ? ”

“ Hoyt gave it to me unexpectedly during the banquet last night. For some reason, he seemed anxious not to have it on his person at the time. He was to have met me at midnight, doubtless to explain the matter. I’ve already told you that Hoyt didn’t appear at the meeting.”

“ Are you in the habit of transacting business at midnight, Mr. Marvin ? ”

Marvin was spared an answer by the ringing of the door-bell. The bewhiskered bearer crossed the room and returned with a *chaprassi*, whose diagonal red sash was bisected by a large brass-plate gleaming with

an official crest. The *chaprassi* handed Inspector Prike a sheaf of papers. The inspector dismissed the messenger and stood with his back to Marvin as he rapidly skimmed through the pages. Suddenly he whirled.

"I have a report," he said in a voice that rang with the cold resonance of a taut steel wire, "from Deputy Inspector Robbins, of the Bow Bazaar Station. It may interest you."

Marvin leaned forward, tensely.

"Mr. Robbins says," Prike continued, "That when you left the church in Dharmtolla Street at midday, you took a taxi to a boarding-house operated by a woman named Pereira in Guru's Lane. You remained for some time in conversation there with a young woman who, according to the deputy inspector's information, goes by the name of Evelyn Branch. Now, that doesn't quite coincide with the story you told me, Mr. Marvin."

Marvin swallowed audibly. He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"Furthermore," Prike went on, "it seems that this Miss Branch, whom you have so quickly forgotten, arrived in Calcutta yesterday by the Burma mail steamer *Bangalore* under the impression that she, and not Miss Antoinette Vrai, was to marry Harrison Hoyt. Although this fact seems to have slipped your memory to-day, Mr. Marvin, you were sufficiently aware of it yesterday to have called it to the attention of Miss Vrai, adding your own suggestion that she retire in favour of Miss Branch. It occurs to me that you may have some explanation to offer."

Marvin arose numbly. He was flushed to the roots of his hair. Yet he looked Inspector Prike squarely in the eye.

"There is no explanation," he said.

"Then you admit you lied?"

"I'd prefer the words, 'gallant falsehood,' " said Marvin. "The motive, I think, is obvious."

Prike nodded. "The fact that you're protecting this girl," he said, "implies that you think she is guilty."

"Not at all. I was merely trying to avoid further unpleasantness for a girl who's had rather more than her share crowded into the past twenty-four hours."

"The law makes no special provision for sentimentalists," said Prike gruffly. "We were speaking of the Maharajah of Jharnpur's *nao-ratna*. Where is it?"

"Right here," said Marvin. He crossed the room to the gramophone, swung the cabinet away from the wall, opened the rear panel. His heart skipped a beat.

He plunged his hand deep into the innermost recesses of the cabinet, probed every bend and cranny. His heart skipped two beats. He withdrew his hand—empty.

"It's gone, inspector!" he announced.

"Rather an unusual place to keep an object of great value. Doesn't a man in your profession have a safe?"

"In my office, inspector. But it was very late when I finally got home last night. And this morning I had no opportunity."

"I shouldn't think that carelessness with valuables was tolerated by Orfèvre, Ltd."

"It isn't, inspector. I——"

"In view of your tendency to romanticise," said Inspector Prike dryly, "I should like to verify a few facts for myself. Do you insist on my getting a search warrant, or shall we just look through your rooms . . . informally?"

"Do as you like," said Marvin. He didn't know yet whether to be relieved or chagrined by the disappearance of the ebony jewel-case.

Inspector Prike made a thorough and methodical examination of the flat. He began by taking the bedroom apart. The bathroom was next, then the kitchen. In the living-room, the divan, the *chaise-longue*, the bookcases, the tall, fiery-red vase of Jaipur enamel—all went through a minute scrutiny. Even the gramophone underwent another systematic search—without yielding a trace of the missing talisman.

Arising from behind the cabinet, Inspector Prike looked out the window. A curious expression came into his face as his gaze travelled down the trunk of the mango tree growing in the compound. He leaned a little farther over the window-sill, then straightened up and faced Marvin.

"So you think the Bosa pearl was stolen?" he asked.

"Evidently."

"By whom?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Since Harrison Hoyt was so eager to get rid of the Maharajah's gems just before he was murdered, don't you think it likely that the *nao-ratna*—and its disappearance—is closely linked with Hoyt's death?"

"I think it very likely."

"Good," said Prike. "Just remember that, the next time you feel tempted to lie to me. In the meantime, you are still at liberty. Good-day."

In leaving Marvin's house, the inspector stopped in the compound, went directly to the base of the mango tree. Lying on the ground was an object which he had seen through the spreading foliage from Marvin's window: a flat ebony case with the arms of the Maharajah of Jharnpur encrusted in mother-of-pearl.

Taking a silk handkerchief from his pocket, Prike wrapped it around his fingers, picked up the box. He flipped back the cover. The case was empty.

CHAPTER X

MUCH to the disgust of Deputy Inspector Robbins, Prike did not arrest Lee Marvin.

"But that chit that Hoyt was trying to write when he keeled over," said Robbins, "I think that must mean Marvin. 'Raffles 82335. . . .' Don't you remember that old play, where the gentleman crook is named 'Raffles'? I should think, inspector, that Marvin, being a gentleman——"

"You're wrong, Robbins."

"You don't think 'Raffles 82335' is a telephone number, do you, inspector?"

"I do not. I think the Raffles referred to is Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore."

"But he's . . . Isn't *he* rather dead, inspector?"

"Sir Stamford Raffles has been dead for more than a hundred years. Nevertheless, I've already sent off a cable to Singapore, asking for a copy of certain hotel registers. . . ."

"Just the same, inspector," Robbins persisted, "I'd feel better if this fellow Marvin were in jail."

"My dear Robbins," Prike explained patiently, "at this stage of the case, a suspect at large is worth two in custody. And with your efficient shadowing, the man is as good as in jail."

"But that business with the Maharajah's jewels, inspector. It's not usual."

"Of course not, Robbins. Neither is the story of Mrs. Pereira's *durwan*—about the American girl running out of the house at midnight, after a man who answers Hoyt's descriptions."

"I'd lock her up, too," said Robbins.

"Did you talk to her, Robbins?"

" Evelyn Branch ? I did ! "

" I thought you did. Always checking up on me, eh, Robbins ? Did she tell you the same story she told me ? "

" She said she ran after Hoyt because he left all of a sudden after just telling her he was sorry for jilting her, and kissing her. And she wanted to talk to him some more, because she thought he sounded like he was in trouble. But she didn't catch him. When she came into Elliots Road, she saw him get into a *ghari* and drive off. So she went back home and to bed. "

" Same story she told me, " said Inspector Prike. " At least she's consistent. How did she impress you, Robbins ? "

" Evelyn Branch ? She's a bit of a looker, all right. Seems nice enough. But you can't be so sure about these American girls. I can't make 'em out. She asked me as many questions as I asked her. "

" What about, Robbins ? "

" Oh, about India . . . and Hoyt . . . and Hoyt's business . . . and about this chap, Lee Marvin. I had to say to her, ' See here, young lady, I'm the one that's—— ' "

" Did you call on Jacques and Antoinette Vrai, too, Robbins ? "

" Yes, " said Robbins, " but I couldn't get much out of 'em. "

" They're still at the Grand Hotel, aren't they ? "

" They're going back to Chandernagore to-night, " said Robbins.

" So Jacques Vrai informed me, " said Prike. " Would you have him locked up, too, Robbins ? "

" Well, I don't like his face. "

" Notice anything peculiar about it, Robbins ? His skin, particularly ? "

" Well, I did notice it was sort of scaly-like. Reminds me of a snake's belly. "

"Correct," said Prike. "Remember that, Robbins. I think Monsieur Vrai's skin might fit in, somewhere. In the meantime, I'm going to have a bite to eat."

It was nine o'clock when Prike went home for dinner. He had eaten only a few mouthfuls of *dal* curry, when the arrival of the police surgeon's autopsy report started him off again.

"A post-mortem operation upon the body of Harrison J. Hoyt," the report read, "revealed that death was caused by dilatation of the heart. Enlargement was apparently due to an organic disorder possibly neuro-genic in origin. There is no evidence of unnatural causes."

The inspector dropped his fork and jumped up from the table. To his astonished bearer, who came running in, he said, "Yusuf, the autopsy surgeon is a fool. I have a good mind to make you autopsy surgeon—only you are not sufficiently *be-wafuq*. Bring me my hat."

Then Inspector Prike hurried to the laboratory of Calcutta University, where Doctor T. T. Chaudry, Professor of Toxicology, had been, since that afternoon, delving intimately into a set of vital organs but recently the property of the late Harrison Hoyt. Amid an array of test-tubes, Bunsen burners and crucibles, the dusky Hindu scientist and his white-coated assistant had been testing strips of stomach tissue for traces of poison.

"What luck, professor?" asked Prike as he entered the laboratory.

"None," said Dr. Chaudry. "We have made a series of colour tests without positive reactions. Preliminary tests for arsenic, morphine and cyanide show negative. Of course, we are not through yet."

"Have you made a spectroscopic analysis?"

"We are working on it now. I have just been studying the first photograph. The nitrogen band is unusually wide."

"Due probably to the advance of decomposition?" suggested Prike.

"Probably," agreed Doctor Chaudry. "Furthermore, the heavy sodium line in the spectrum is probably meaningless also. Salt in the food the man ate just before his death no doubt."

The inspector nodded.

"By the way, inspector," Dr. Chaudry continued, "that gentleman you sent here just left."

"Gentleman?" Prike was surprised. "I sent no one here. Deputy Inspector Robbins, perhaps."

"No," said the professor, "he is not from the police. He said he would come back. A small man with a thin moustache, badly in need of a hair-cut and, I am afraid, of a bath also. He is a journalist, I believe. Here he is now."

Rufus Dormer sauntered into the laboratory, his grimy topee pushed to the back of his head. The fact that he wore a sun-helmet at all after sundown, at variance with the best Anglo-Indian custom, together with the badly-rumpled condition of his soiled whites, marked him as not a *pukka* sahib.

"Well, Prike," he said, as he poked the inspector disrespectfully in the chest with a forefinger, the nail of which was edged in black, "I see you're stumped again, as usual."

"You have been misinformed," said the inspector coolly.

"Oh, I fancy not," said Dormer, with a smile of malicious enjoyment. "You have an obvious murder on your hands and you can't even prove the man was murdered. No trace of poison, eh, Prike?"

"That's no concern of yours," the inspector replied.

Rufus Dormer laughed loudly. "I knew it," he declared. "That's the whole trouble with the British *raj* in India. You train superior Oriental minds in piddling inferior Occidental methods. Look at Doctor

Chaudry here. He has forty centuries of wisdom and culture behind him ; but do you allow him to use his heritage ? Of course not. The dominant race insists that he play with the half-baked theories of adolescent Western science. Result : He gets nowhere. Don't you know, Prike, that there are poisons in India far too subtle and mysterious for your shiny, new European laboratories to detect ? ”

“ Old Wives' Tales,” said Prike.

“ Arrogant British ignorance,” countered Dormer. “ I know for a fact that the Khasis of Assam have a substance which produces death with all the symptoms of typhoid. In the Nilgiri Hills, men die of a poison which Western doctors mistake for cholera.”

“ Nonsense,” said Inspector Prike. “ Both these poisons are well-known cadaveric alkaloids and can be analysed. I'm sure Dr. Chaudry could give you the formulas. Incidentally, Dormer, what are you doing here ? ”

“ Two interests bring me,” Dormer replied. “ First, my public. The readers of the *Anglo-Bengal Times* will be clamouring for the gory details of the Hoyt case. Second, I knew I'd find you here.”

“ You wish to see me ? ”

“ Yes. I suppose that you are temporary custodian of the late Mr. Hoyt's assets.”

“ Well ? ”

“ Hoyt owed me five hundred rupees. I want you to get the money for me.”

“ You will have to make a claim against the estate through the usual channels,” said Inspector Prike.

“ I need the money at once,” Dormer insisted.

“ Isn't that a rather high-handed manner for one with your magnificent salary—What do they pay you at the *Anglo-Bengal Times* ? Two hundred rupees a month?—and who borrows money from Bengali clerks ? ”

"I want the money," Dormer repeated. "Hoyt owed it to me."

"For how long?"

"For months."

"There was some argument over it, no doubt?"

"I wouldn't argue with a man like Hoyt," sneered Dormer. "I despised him."

"But you took his money."

"Gladly. Particularly as I was being paid for the pleasant task of embarrassing the type of person I am able to hate so cordially—the fifth-rate European who comes to India to consider himself superior to a first-rate Hindu like Dr. Chaudry."

"For what specific purpose was Hoyt to pay you five hundred rupees?"

"For services rendered," said Dormer glibly.

Prike gestured toward the door. "Come with me, please," he said.

Dormer held back, mockingly apologetic. "You'll lose caste if you're seen with me," he said.

"You flatter yourself," said Prike drily. "Come."

As Prike led Dormer to a car parked in front of the Medical College across Mirzapur Street, he took a crooked pipe from his pocket, filled and lit it. Even the heavy fragrance of strong tobacco emanating from the inspector's briar failed to dissipate the warm, frowsy eddies arising from the man beside him. For several minutes he sat smoking in silence. Suddenly he said:

"I'm glad I ran across you to-night, Dormer, although originally I had not intended speaking to you for a day or two. My picture of your part in Hoyt's blackmailing game is not quite complete."

"I'm not a blackmailer," said Dormer sullenly.

"You've been taking money from a blackmailer."

"It's none of my business what Hoyt did," said Dormer. "As the French say, 'Money has no odour.'"

"Money hasn't," said Inspector Prike, puffing furiously on his pipe. "But much connected with the career of the late Mr. Hoyt has a distinctly unpleasant odour. Hoyt used you, I believe, as an entering wedge to the news columns of the *Anglo-Bengal Times*. Your duty was to write laudatory articles about his clients, creating for them a ridiculously exaggerated, if not false, importance. After you had puffed up the client's ego sufficiently, so that even he began to believe himself a personage, I believe the process was to discover then some skeleton in the client's closet and to rattle the bones, which he believed safely buried, until his newly created importance was seriously endangered. The price for which the skeleton would stop rattling varied, I understand, with the client's bank account."

"I know nothing about Hoyt's financial arrangements," said Dormer, "except that he owed me five hundred rupees."

"I am afraid, Mr. Dormer," said Prike, pointing the smoking stem of his pipe at the scrawny journalist, "that you have not the proper respect for the truth. You took an active part in the attempted blackmail of Kurt Julius."

"What about Kurt Julius?"

"If you will come in," said Prike, as the car turned off Lower Circular Road and stopped in the compound of his house, "I will explain."

The shabby little journalist was not at all ill-at-ease in the comparatively luxurious interior of Inspector Prike's quarters. His worn shoes scuffed unabashed over the velvet pile of a Murshidabad rug as he walked about the room looking at the Travancore ivories, the carved Ajmer marbles and a strange Monghyr fish of filagree silver—all trophies of some exploit of the inspector's fifteen years with the Criminal Investigation Department in India.

After watching him with mingled resentment and amusement, for several minutes, Inspector Prike took down a book from his well-filled shelves and handed it to Dormer.

"You know this volume, of course."

Dormer took the book. On the lurid jacket, across the snarling head of a Bengal tiger was the title, *The Voice of The Jungle*, by KURT JULIUS."

"Yes, I know it," said Dormer. "Hoyt wrote it." He flipped open the pages to the frontispiece: a photograph of the corpulent Julius himself, rifle in hand, with one foot proudly planted on a dead rhinoceros.

"Have you read it?"

Dormer laughed. "A beautiful piece of fiction," he sneered. "There are more hair-raising escapes in here, more amazing heroism than in even the tall tales Julius himself tells around the Grand Hotel bar. The man's topee is three sizes too small for him since this book came out. I think he believes it himself. He's puffed up like a poisoned jackal."

"Just the proper state of mind, I should judge," said Inspector Prike quietly, "to receive the final thrust according to the Hoyt system: Shell out or have the inflated ego Hoyt created for you ridiculously punctured.

"Not necessarily," said Dormer, avoiding Prike's eyes. "Julius is a vain liar but he has a sound knowledge of animals—especially their market value. He was keeper in the Hamburg Zoo and, I think, he was with the Bronx Zoo in New York. After all he——"

"What about this?" interrupted Inspector Prike. He opened a drawer in his desk and brought out a sheaf of galley proofs, which he tossed to Dormer.

The journalist fingered his frayed-looking moustache as he glanced at the columns of type, but his expression did not change. The first sheet contained a single headline in screaming letters: "CALCUTTA SMILES AT

JUNGLE MUNCHAUSEN." The second sheet carried a two column lead which began : " Posing in his own writings as a great huntsman who traps the ferocious tiger in the fastness of his Bengal forests, captures the rare Tibetan *takin* in the impossible mountain passes of the Himalayas, and snatches venomous snakes from the tall *terai* grass with his bare hands, Kurt Julius is being laughingly rechristened in India to-day as ' The bar-room Shikari. ' " Another column continued in the same vein. A fourth sheet was made up of a lay-out of photographs illustrating Kurt Julius in various drinking poses ; adjacent were other photographs, without Julius, of half-clad Hindu hunters. The caption began : " Kurt Julius drinks chota-pegs at the Grand Hotel in Calcutta while barefoot natives, armed only with a forked stick, dare the fangs of the deadly king cobra for Julius' next shipment to American zoos . . . "

Rufus Dormer tossed the proofs back to Inspector Prike. " What of it ? " he asked.

" I seem to recognise your brilliant satiric style in this little masterpiece," said Prike. " You write much better than Hoyt. I find, also, that the type for these proofs was set in the job printing department of the *Anglo-Bengal Times*. An excellent idea—that of confronting Mr. Julius with the convincing reality of cold type. He could not know, of course, that these proofs were printed privately. What price was he asked to stop publication ? "

Dormer did not reply at once. He fished in his torn pocket for an imaginary cigarette. Watching him closely, Prike brought out a box of Trichinopoly cheroots. Dormer reached greedily. Prike glanced at his extended fingers, withdrew the box, himself selected two cheroots and presented them to Dormer.

" As far as I know," said Dormer, striking a match, " Julius has never seen these proofs."

"I should like to verify that fact," said Inspector Prike. "Suppose we call on Mr. Julius—together."

It was nearly midnight when Prike and Dormer arrived at the Chowringhee entrance of the Grand Hotel. Kurt Julius was not in the bar. The desk clerk said that he had retired for the night and was not to be disturbed, so Prike, with Dormer in tow, went to the animal buyer's room unannounced. The door was unlocked. Prike walked in without knocking. A very black Tamil bearer who was energetically attacking the inside of the mosquito canopy with a long rattan whisk turned in surprise.

"Julius Sahib *kidhar hai*?" Prike asked.

Before the bearer could reply, Julius Sahib, himself, emerged indignantly from the bathroom clad only in a pair of baby-blue silk drawers. His large egg-shaped head, with its florid perspiring face seemed to have been fitted as an afterthought to the bulging white body of an enormous porcelain Bhudda. When he saw Inspector Prike his indignation vanished.

"Ach, pardon me, inspector, I didn't know it was you. I will get dressed."

"Please don't," said Prike. "I hardly think Mr. Dormer will insist on conventional attire. As for myself I am sure you will be able to lie to me quite as well without clothes."

"Lie?" Kurt Julius' little pig-like eyes grew round. "About what should I lie?"

"About this," said Prike, carelessly handing Julius the galley proofs of *Calcutta Smiles at Jungle Munchausen*.

The springs of a divan sagged complainingly beneath the animal buyer's two hundred and fifty pounds. One hand grasped the proofs. The other moved nervously over the curly gunny-coloured hair plastered to his skull. He glowered at Dormer.

"I found these in Harrison Hoyt's files," said Prike

quickly. "Don't blame Mr. Dormer. He tells me that you know nothing about this matter."

Julius became suddenly interested in the proofs. He made clucking sounds with his tongue as his pudgy fingers turned over the sheets. He slapped his bare thigh resoundingly.

"Ach, that Hoyt," he muttered. "Such lies! No wonder a scoundrel like that gets killed. Yes, Dormer was right; I didn't see this. Just as good, maybe, I didn't. Such . . . such a libel!" The Julius tongue clucked like an irate hen.

"How much did Hoyt want not to publish this article?" asked Prike quietly.

Julius stopped clucking. The colour left his lips.

"But . . . nothing!" he protested. "Hoyt didn't ask nothing. He didn't even show me this . . . this *verdamter* outrage. Didn't Dormer say—?"

"Mr. Dormer didn't know that I also found this in Harrison Hoyt's files," said Prike, extracting a paper from his pocket and unfolding it before the widening eyes of Kurt Julius.

Rufus Dormer sidled up and peered uneasily over the fat, white shoulder of the animal buyer. He read:

NATIONAL SUNDAY NEWSPAPER SYNDICATE,
56 SEVENTH AVENUE,
NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

"GENTLEMEN,

"Referring to the article *Calcutta Smiles at Jungle Munchausen*, of which I have just received your proofs, may I remind you of the provisional terms under which I submitted this. You understand, of course, that the story is to be published only when I cable you the release date.

"Very sincerely yours,
"HARRISON J. HOYT."

F

Copies for :

File.

Mr. Kurt Julius.

Kurt Julius spread his hands in a gesture of amazement and appeal. "That no-good Hoyt must have forgotten to send me this letter," he spluttered. "I never saw it before. Truly, inspector."

The inspector's unwavering eyes never left the red face of the animal buyer. "How much did Hoyt ask?" he demanded.

Kurt Julius with great effort got to his feet. The crimson of his cheeks deepened to a royal shade of purple. "My God, inspector, you aren't . . . you don't think I killed that skunk, Hoyt?"

"How much?" Prike repeated.

Julius' eyes, dilated with fear, moved from Prike to Dormer and back to Prike. His lips worked silently for several seconds. Then, with a groan, he covered his face with his hands.

"Ach, what's the use?" he breathed. "You know it anyhow. I bet Dormer told you. Hoyt said he would disgrace me unless I paid him twenty thousand rupees."

Inspector Prike carefully refolded the letter without a show of surprise. "Did you pay it?"

Kurt Julius gazed at the inspector through the plump lattice of his fingers. "Yes," he admitted after a pause.

"When?"

"Well, I didn't pay it at all," amended Julius, dropping his hands. "Ach, how could I, inspector? Twenty thousand rupees is a lot of money. All my capital is in animals. I got for fifteen thousand rupees worth of elephants on the high seas now which I don't get paid for until the ship gets to San Francisco next month. That animal house of mine on Dumdum Road

is full of cats, snakes and parokeets for another ten or fifteen thousand rupees. For those I don't get paid 'till I ship them to Germany. Besides——"

"How much did you pay Hoyt on account?" interrupted Prike.

"Five thousand rupees last month."

"And when was the next installment due?"

"Another five thousand rupees I promised pretty soon."

"To-day, perhaps?"

"Let me see . . . I think . . . Yes, it was to-day."

"And you didn't pay it?"

"Ach, how could I, inspector? Hoyt is dead."

Inspector Prike reached for his hat. He nodded curtly. "Thank you, Mr. Julius," he said, "that's all I wanted to know. Coming Mr. Dormer?"

He started for the door. Julius caught his sleeve.

"Please, inspector, you don't think . . . ? I mean, have you found out yet who killed him?"

The inspector turned slowly. "Have you?" he asked very deliberately.

"How should I know, inspector? Everybody thinks I know, but I don't know. To-night you asked me. A few hours ago this American fellow, Linnet, he was asking me. Kobayashi was asking me. Even that Babu from Hoyt's office, this afternoon he was asking me. They all ask me, inspector, but I don't know any more about it than these six hyenas I bought yesterday from Ali Hassan. I . . . I don't know anything, inspector."

"Naturally," said Inspector Prike, his hand on the door-knob, "I didn't think you would. Good-night."

Once outside of Kurt Julius' room, Inspector Prike paused to look up and down the corridor. In front of nearly every door a Hindu bearer was sleeping, stretched across the threshold like so many dead men.

Prike took a few steps up the corridor and stopped at the room adjoining that of Julius. There was a broom leaning against the door and a wastepaper basket next to it. A gleam of dull red among the rubbish in the basket attracted Prike's glance. He stooped, fished out a large fountain pen of hard rubber composition. It was a fat, oversize fountain pen of the type made to hold twice as much ink as the usual model. Prike was about to toss the pen back into the basket, when he noticed that beneath the inscription "Jumbo Pen" stamped into the red barrel in gold letters, were smaller characters reading "Made in Japan."

Prike frowned, put the pen in his pocket, noted the number of the room, and went down stairs. He stopped at the desk.

"Please tell me who is occupying room 213," he said to the clerk.

The clerk replied that 213 was unoccupied.

"Are you certain?" asked Prike.

"Quite," said the clerk. "The American gentleman who booked it yesterday checked out an hour ago."

"What was the American gentleman's name?"

The clerk consulted his records. "George Linnet," he said.

"Do you know to what station Mr. Linnet had his luggage removed?"

"To no station, sir," said the clerk. "Mr. Linnet has gone to stay at the Alipore Palace of the Maharajah of Jharnpur."

"Thank you." Inspector Prike stood a moment staring pensively into space. Suddenly like a man awakening from a trance, he walked briskly from the hotel into Chowringhee Road.

CHAPTER XI

LEE MARVIN, to put it mildly, was in a state of slight mental confusion. Here was a problem that could not be solved by applying *aqua regia* or the tests of hardness, cleavage, and crystallization. When Inspector Prike had tripped him neatly in a blatant, if gallant, lie, and further doubt had been cast upon his veracity by the disappearance of the *nao-ratna*, Marvin had fully expected to be arrested. Prike's disarming courtesy had served only to increase his uneasiness. He knew he was being watched; all his movements that day had apparently been recorded in detail. "You are still at liberty," Prike had said. His liberty was about that of an amoeba in a drop of water under the microscope of the C.I.D.

When Prike left his apartment, Marvin did something he had never done before: He took a drink alone, a stiff drink of Scotch without either ice or soda. Then he went to the offices of Orfèvre, Ltd., and made a desperate effort to lose himself in work. He dug into the correspondence that had accumulated on his desk during the day, reports from his gold-buying agents in Dacca, Patha, and Cuttack. His eyes skimmed figures on bullion purchases by the United States treasury, on sapphire production in Eastern Siam, on estimates of the De Beers diamond reserves . . . but his mind could not assimilate the information. He could not help thinking about the Bosa pearl.

Despite the fact that he felt he was definitely suspected in connection with the murder of Hoyt, Marvin found himself coming to the conclusion that Orfèvre, Ltd., owned an equity in the Bosa pearl and

that he would be shirking in his duty to his firm if he did not make a strenuous effort to get it back—police or no police. After all, he had given Hoyt eight thousand rupees, and he had no proof that Hoyt was not acting legitimately in offering him the pearl. If Hoyt had stolen the Maharajah's *nao-ratna*, why had not the rightful owner come forward openly to recover his property lawfully, instead of using the tactics of a burglar? And who had taken the valuable talisman from Marvin's flat, anyhow? Some one, obviously, who had seen Hoyt give the package to Marvin at the bachelor dinner, and who either knew or had guessed its contents. Evelyn Branch, too, knew he had the *nao-ratna*; he had told her himself. But she would not have had a chance to steal them from his rooms—unless she had gone there during the several hours Marvin spent at the church in Dharmtolla Street that morning. She could have done that, of course, if Hoyt had told her about Marvin during his midnight visit . . .

"Mister Marvin, please."

Marvin looked up to behold Babu Gundranesh Dutt standing before his desk, mopping perspiration from his very round face.

"Hello, Babu."

"Am coming to make peace offering of abject apologies," said Gundranesh Dutt. "Greatly fear have incriminated you unintentionally with police, sar."

"How, Babu?"

"During unguarded moment of severe questioning by Inspector Prike at church," said the Babu, "greatly fear I released cat from gunny-bag by divulging information that you were outside Mr. Hoyt's domicile in smallish hours of this morning-time."

"That's all right, Babu. I told the inspector that myself."

"So glad." Gundranesh Dutt inflated himself for a prolonged sibilant sigh of relief.

"But how did you know I was there, Babu?" Marvin asked.

"Was also keeping nocturnal vigil in vicinity," the Babu replied.

"Why?"

"Was seeking word with late deceased employer, regarding possible half holiday on wedding day. On returning home last evening-time, discovered that Cousin Danilal Dutt of Barrackpore was arriving on morrow for celebrating Diwali festival in bosom of Dutt family. Was desirous, therefore, to secure slight leave of absence——"

"Did you see any one else come to Mr. Hoyt's while you were there?"

"Only two persons, sar."

"Two? Who were they?"

"Was able to identify only Mr. Chitterji Rao. Second person arrived in taxi shortly behind you, Mr. Marvin. . . ."

"Behind me? Was he following me?"

"Am unable to state positively, Mr. Marvin. Possibly . . ."

"I was there twice, Babu. Which time did he seem to be following me?"

"Approximately at two o'clock, if memory is not failing . . ."

"Probably you're right. I don't suppose you'll be at Hoyt's office any more, now, Babu?"

"For present am reposing quietly at home at following address." The Babu gave Marvin a visiting card big enough to have been dealt from a bridge deck.

"Thank you, Babu," said Marvin, pocketing the card. "And good-bye."

Well, that explained how the thief had so easily

located Marvin's hiding place : He could have followed Marvin home, climbed the mango tree in the compound, watched him put the *nao-ratna* in the gramophone, waited for a chance to steal it. Two questions remained unanswered : Who was the thief, and what was Marvin going to do about it ?

Marvin decided that a drink might clarify his thought on the matter, so he stopped off at Spence's on the way home. However, the sight of his perspiring friends, munching *chini bedam* and spiced crisps as they quaffed *chota-pegs* failed to prove particularly stimulating. After the third drink he took a *ghari* to Theatre Road.

As Marvin let himself into his flat the fragrance of cigarette smoke floated to his nostrils. He frowned pensively, closing the door silently behind him. The smoke was not the autumnal-smelling emanation of vile native fags but the agreeable aroma of Virginia tobacco. Had his bearer been into the cigarettes again ? Marvin hurried down the hall to the living-room.

On the threshold he paused. Blue tendrils of smoke curled upward from the depth of his best easy-chair. The high back of the chair hid the occupant. As he watched, an arm reached out to flick an ash into the brass receiver on the end table—a slender, white arm. The fingers that held the cigarette were long and graceful. Marvin cleared his throat.

Instantly the figure of a young woman sprang from the chair. Evelyn Branch turned to face him. For a brief moment fear flashed in her grey-green eyes. Her elbows were tight against her sides and her lithe body was taut with nervous defiance. When she saw Marvin she relaxed.

" You frightened me," she smiled. " I didn't hear you come in."

"I don't usually knock before entering. This is my own home."

"I'm sorry," said the girl. "Your bearer let me in. He said he was expecting you for dinner."

Marvin advanced slowly into the room. The surge of pleasure he had felt on recognising Evelyn Branch gave way first to surprise when he noted her frightened expression, then to suspicion.

"So you've come for dinner?" he asked, none too cordially.

"I . . . I've come to apologise. I'm sorry I was rude to you this afternoon."

Marvin motioned the girl back to the easy-chair. He lit a cigarette. Then he asked: "What's happened to cause this sudden change of heart?"

"Nothing's happened," the girl replied.

"Then what are you afraid of? When I came in just now you jumped like a scared rabbit. Why?"

"I don't know. It's just——" Evelyn's fingers fluttered in a vague gesture. "It's just India, I guess. This city gives me the creeps. It's so big and teeming and . . . and strange. Even if this awful thing hadn't happened to Harry, I'm sure Calcutta would make me jumpy. I feel so alone . . . and you've been very kind. . . ."

The girl's voice faded to a whisper. Marvin walked to the back of her chair. He noted idly that her shoulders twitched nervously, that tiny silken whorls showed on the nape of her neck below the brim of her close-fitting white hat. The hat was too small for India; not enough protection against the sun. He must tell her. No, he wouldn't tell her anything. She knew too much already . . . about the Bosa pearl, for instance.

"You're not being frank with me," he said suddenly. "What are you afraid of?"

The girl answered without looking at him. "The police," she said. "They came after you left. First one detective and then another. They asked questions until I thought I'd go crazy. You told them about me, of course—because I wouldn't go to Darjeeling."

"So you think I sent the police after you?"

"Well, I . . . I don't know. George Linnet says you must have."

"Linnet? So you've been seeing him, too. How did he find you, since you didn't go to the Grand Hotel, as he expected?"

"I sent for him."

"I see." Marvin walked around to the front of the chair. He stood with his hands in his pockets until Evelyn Branch raised her eyes to meet his gaze. "What is Linnet to you?"

"Nothing. He hasn't even suggested . . . taking me to Darjeeling. I met him on the steamer for the first time."

"Then why did you send for him?"

"I wanted to talk to him. The police told me so many disagreeable things about Harry Hoyt—they hinted that he was a blackmailer—that corresponded with what Colonel Linnet had been telling me about Harry on the steamer, I thought maybe the Colonel could help straighten me out. . . ."

"What was Linnet's business with Hoyt?"

"I don't think they had any business together." The girl paused. "Colonel Linnet came to India to do some big game hunting, and I think Harry Hoyt arranged for him to be the guest of some Indian prince; that's all."

Marvin started. "Not the Maharajah of Jharnpur?"

"I think that was his name."

Marvin looked at the girl for a long moment without speaking. Linnet—Jharnpur—the Bosa pearl

—Hoyt—Evelyn Branch. What was the connection here?

"Funny thing," Evelyn continued, "but Colonel Linnet never believed I was coming out to marry Harrison Hoyt. He thought I was working some racket with Harry and tried to find out what it was."

The shadow of a smile trembled briefly on the girl's lips and then was gone. At first it seemed a wistful smile. Or was it roguish? Marvin was on his guard. The girl was probably acting. He must not put too much faith in the innocent expression of those big, grey-green eyes.

"Well, what kind of racket was it?" he asked abruptly.

Evelyn laughed softly. "I hadn't the faintest idea that Harry Hoyt had turned blackmailer," she said. "Or——"

She stood up. She was standing very close to Marvin, so close that the sense of her nearness, the warmth of her body, the fragrance of her hair, enveloped him like some subtle vapour with the occult power to make him see things in her eyes that he had never seen before—things that belonged to another universe where beauty was not fragile, and cruelty had not yet been born. He had a sudden impulse to sweep her into his arms, to hold her in his crushing embrace while he told her that he was being stiff-necked and proud and foolishly suspicious, that he had lied for her, that he would gladly lie again at the first drop of her wistful little blonde head against his shoulder. . . .

"Show me the Bosa pearl," said Evelyn Branch.

Marvin came down to earth with a bump.

"I haven't got it," he said.

"Oh." The spell was broken. Tiny hard lines formed at the corners of the girl's eyes. Her lips were

pressed firmly together. "You said this afternoon you had it."

"But I haven't got it now."

"Where is it?"

"It's been stolen."

The girl's eyes flashed disbelief. "Is that the best story you can tell?" she said.

"It happens to be the truth."

Evelyn sat down again. She opened her bag, took out her compact and began powdering her nose as a signal for imminent departure. As the open bag dropped in her lap, some papers slid partly out. Marvin stared at them.

"Do you know," the girl said, "for a while this afternoon after you left, I flattered myself that you were one of those rare, disinterested persons, who——" She stopped, saw Marvin's stare, instantly snapped her bag closed.

"I'm sorry," said Marvin. "I didn't mean to pry, but I couldn't help seeing."

"Seeing what?"

"That cablegram in your bag. So you lied to me yesterday?"

"Lied to you?" The girl paled.

"Yes. You told me that Hoyt hadn't tried to stop your coming out to India. But I saw that cable in your bag, addressed to you in New York. Let me quote from memory: 'Don't come. Difficult situation pending. Wait for letter explaining.' Is that right?"

"Approximately."

"Why didn't you tell me about that yesterday?"

"You don't think any woman likes to admit to a handsome stranger that she's been made a fool of, do you?"

"But why didn't you come here—in the face of Hoyt's cable?"

Evelyn bit her lip. "I'll tell you that," she said, "when you're ready to talk business on the Bosa pearl."

"But I've told you the truth about that. . . ."

"All right." She held out her hand. Marvin took it. "Good-bye."

She stood a moment with her hand in his, then suddenly, almost fiercely, she snatched her fingers away. She retreated a few steps, looking at him with an amazingly complex expression which to Marvin seemed a composite of disappointment and pleading, of fond reluctance and fear-born determination, of deep suspicion and child-like trust, of complete bewilderment.

"I almost forgot," she said. "Here."

She opened her bag again, took out some small object which Marvin did not see, flung it past him. It rattled across the floor.

"Wait a minute," said Marvin. "Don't you think that we——?"

But Evelyn was gone. Marvin could still feel the touch of her fingers across his palm as he listened to the door slam. He started after her, took a dozen steps into the hall, then stopped. He lit a cigarette, walked slowly back into the living-room, sat down.

As he watched the smoke curl from his cigarette, Marvin congratulated himself that he had not kissed Evelyn Branch. For a moment he had trembled on the rapturous verge. She knew it, too, as she stood there close to him; the very atmosphere was electric with the tension of mutual feeling. She had even expected him to kiss her. But it was only part of her game—a game in which the Bosa pearl was patently the stake, a game in which Harrison Hoyt had lost his life. Suddenly Marvin ground out his cigarette, jumped up.

On the floor near the gramophone something glit-

tered: the missile which Evelyn had flung at him as she left. Marvin hurried forward, stooped, picked up a silver button—a common type of detachable button made in imitation of the old-time Siamese tical.

“I’ll be damned!” he said aloud.

So she was light-fingered, too, this girl! Hesitantly, almost fearfully, he reached into his pocket for the silver button that had popped off the Dutch-style jacket of Kurt Julius in Hoyt’s office the day before. The button was still there! Wonderingly he drew it out, placed it on his hand beside that one he had picked up from the floor.

The convex surface of each silver slug was intricately carved in the shape of a tiger’s head. The two buttons were identical.

With a brusque motion he thrust the bits of silver into his pocket. Where the dickens did the girl get Kurt Julius’s silver button? Was Julius, too, mixed up in this business of the Bosa pearl? Unlikely, and yet . . . Perhaps that was the cause of the quarrel Marvin had overheard in Hoyt’s office. He would find out.

He crossed the room to a wall telephone, twisted the crank. He twisted for nearly five minutes before he finally got through to the Grand Hotel. Kurt Julius? No, Mr. Julius was not in. He had gone out, perhaps half an hour ago.

Marvin slammed down the receiver. He clapped his hands. His bearer arrived on the run.

“Get a taxi!” Marvin ordered.

CHAPTER XII

At half-past eleven that night, Inspector Prike stepped carefully around two half-naked coolies and a hump-backed sacred bull who were sleeping peacefully on the pavement outside the Bow Bazaar Police Station, and went inside. He had dropped Rufus Dormer in Dalhousie Square five minutes before.

Prike found Deputy Inspector Robbins still at work. A spinning cloud of green flies beat crazily against Robbin's desk-light, dropping to his blotter in crawling, hopping swarms. Robbins brushed them off with his hand as Prike entered.

"Robbins," said Prike, "I suppose that in your usual thorough manner you have been keeping an alert eye on a man named George Linnet."

"Colonel Linnet," corrected the deputy inspector.

"He was known as Colonel to the passengers of the *Bangalore* which brought him to Calcutta yesterday," said Prike, "but his American passport mentions no military title."

"He looks like a military man," said the deputy inspector.

"He was," said Prike. "I cabled the War Department in Washington this afternoon and received the reply that Linnet served as Lieutenant with the American Expeditionary Forces in France during the war."

"So that's where he got his hand blown off," said Robbins. "I was noticing he wears a grey glove on his left hand, and the hand hangs down like a shop-window dummy's."

"My Washington cable says that Linnet lost the

first, second and third fingers of his left hand in grenade practice behind the lines in 1918," said Prike. "Washington also reports that Linnet was court-martialled for insubordination and dismissed from the service in June, 1919."

Deputy Inspector Robbins favoured his superior with a look of grudging admiration.

"Then his title of Colonel is just a hoax?" he asked.

"I am not sure yet," Prike answered. "In the meantime you are aware that Linnet has left the Grand Hotel."

"Yes," said Robbins, consulting some papers which fluttered in the faint, warm breeze stirred up by the ceiling fan. "He left the Grand Hotel at ten-thirty-five this evening in a motor-car belonging to the household of the Maharajah of Jharnpur. He proceeded directly to the Maharajah's Palace in Alipore."

Inspector Prike reached across the desk toward the sheaf of papers in Robbins' hand. "Could I have the seating plan of the Hoyt bachelor dinner?" he asked. "Where was Linnet sitting in respect to Hoyt?"

"If you are after some one who had a chance to slip a powder into Hoyt's food or drink," said Robbins, handing over the table diagram, "what about this chap Kurt Julius? He was sitting right next to Hoyt."

"Yes, I know," said Prike. For a moment he studied the diagram in silence. Marvin sat across the table; too long a reach. Dormer was several seats away. Linnet was closer. Chitterji Rao . . . Henry Kobayashi . . . and Julius . . . ?

Prike looked up as the desk telephone rang. Robbins lifted the receiver.

"Robbins speaking . . . Who? . . . Fancy! . . . That is jolly! . . . See here, you ruddy *jangli-walla*, how the blooming hell could he get away from you? . . . Well, take another *dehko* . . . Yes, and right off!"

Robbins slammed down the receiver and looked sheepishly at Inspector Prike. "Jenkins lost his man," he said apologetically.

"Kurt Julius?"

Robbins nodded. "Seems like he came rushing out of his hotel like a madman. Rufus Dormer was waiting for him at the Chrowinghee entrance——"

"Dormer?" Prike stopped mopping his bald spot and stared at Robbins in surprise.

"Dormer," the deputy inspector repeated. "Seems like when he saw Dormer, Julius started to go back into the hotel, but Dormer grabbed his arm. Then the two of them jumped into a *ghari*, very excited, and talking loud. Jenkins didn't hear what they said but he follows them when they go galloping off down Lindsay Street. Somewhere near the Municipal Bazaar he loses sight of them and when he finds the *ghari* again, Julius and Dormer are both gone. No sign of either of them." Robbins picked up the phone. "But I'll pick them up again inside the half-hour. I'll have twenty men on the job in two shakes of a *bhain's* tail."

Prike smiled tolerantly. "No need of it," he said. "I rather fancy we'll hear from Julius himself before your men find him."

"Voluntarily?" Robbins frowned. "How so, inspector?"

"When I talked to Julius half an hour ago," said Prike, "he was extremely agitated. At that time, I couldn't determine whether his agitation was due to the fact that I had discovered a motive for which he might have murdered Hoyt, or whether he was boiling internally with some particularly explosive bit of information that he couldn't quite decide to divulge to me. From what Jenkins has just told you on the phone, I'm inclined to think that Julius was definitely

anxious to reveal something which he was afraid to do in the presence of Dormer. His reaction when he found Dormer waiting for him outside the hotel indicates that—assuming, of course, that Julius was on his way to see me. I would suggest therefore, that we wait a little, Robbins, to see if he is able to get rid of Dormer."

They waited. Midnight came and went. The suicidal swarm of green flies drifted into little heaps on the desk and on the floor. Deputy Inspector Robbins fidgeted with the waxed ends of his blond moustache, evidently spoiling for action but unwilling to take the initiative in the face of his superior's calm determination to wait. Inspector Prike spent the interval in the adjoining office, which was that of the police surgeon. At half-past twelve he came in to Robbins bearing a thick volume on medical toxicology.

"Robbins," he asked, "have you ever run across a case of chronic chromium poisoning?"

"I don't believe so," said the deputy inspector. "What are the symptoms?"

"Excoriation of the epidermis and ulceration of the septum," quoted Prike, reading from the medical volume. "In other words, Robbins, scaly skin and a sore nose."

"I didn't notice that this chap Hoyt had a sore nose," said Robbins.

"I wasn't speaking of Hoyt," Prike said, closing the book, "but I did notice the symptoms on Jacques Vrai of Chandernagore. Do you happen to know, Robbins, whether the chromium mines are still being worked in New Caledonia?"

Deputy Inspector Robbins suddenly stopped twisting his moustache and stared at Prike with an expression of growing comprehension.

"New Caledonia!" he exclaimed. "That's the French penal colony!"

"France has sent no convicts to New Caledonia since Jacques Vrai was old enough to commit a felony," was Prike's smiling comment. "However, there is still a considerable number of convict families living on the island. Be a good fellow, Robbins, and pass me a telegraph form."

Thoughtfully Inspector Prike composed a cablegram to the prefect of police at Nouméa in New Caledonia, asking for information regarding a man posing as Jacques Vrai, about forty-two years old, five-feet eleven, black hair greying at the temples, weighing about one hundred and forty pounds, long scar across the back of his right hand, believed to have worked in the chromium mines long enough to have contracted chronic poisoning.

The inspector called a cyclist to carry his cablegram to the general post office, then produced the fountain-pen he had found in the waste-basket at the Grand Hotel.

"Ever see a pen like this, Robbins?"

"It's a big one, all right," said Robbins. "Made in Japan, eh?" He unscrewed the cap. "Why, it's broken, inspector. Where's the gold pen-point?"

"You'll notice, Robbins," said Prike, "that the upper segment of the barrel has been unscrewed, and the pen, as well as the usual long rubber reservoir for ink, has been removed."

"You don't think the pen has anything to do with that Raffles note, do you, inspector?"

"The 'Raffles note' was written in pencil," said Prike. "Of course, this pen may mean nothing. On the other hand, my curiosity is aroused by the fact that it has been dismantled and thrown away—despite the fact that it is apparently a new pen."

"It looks new, all right," said Robbins.

"I've just been examining the clip under the

surgeon's microscope in the next office," said the inspector. "I hoped to find a tell-tale shred of cotton or wool that would indicate the sort of pocket it had been carried in. I found nothing. So I'm assuming, tentatively, that the pen has never been carried. I want you to take the pen, Robbins, and have one of your men find out all the shops in Calcutta that sell this brand. Find out, also, if any of this model have been sold in the past few days."

"Certainly, inspector."

Robbins was putting the pen into a drawer of his desk when a high tenor voice resounded through the dingy corridors of the police station, calling in *chi-chi* accents for Inspector Prike. An instant later Babu Gundranesh Dutt was ushered in, panting for breath, and goggle-eyed with excitement. Perspiration streamed from his multiple chins and he clasped a black umbrella against the vast rotundity of his stomach.

"Inspector Sahib!" he gasped. "Am having utmost difficulties in finding you out. Have been frantically traversing most of Calcutta in effort to deliver message from Julius Sahib."

Inspector Prike glanced at Robbins. He was not gloating, merely assuring himself that the deputy inspector appreciated the fulfilment of his prophecies.

"I'll be damned," said Robbins. "And where is Julius?"

"He is just now awaiting inspector at Julius animal hotel in Dumdum Road. Quite urgent that interview be consummated immediately."

The deputy inspector sprang to his feet and started for the door. Prike held up a restraining hand.

"Just a moment," said Prike. "There's not that much hurry, Robbins. See here, Babu, what were you doing at Julius's place on Dumdum Road?"

"Was not visiting establishment of Mr. Julius,"

protested Gundranesh Dutt. "In fact, have never visited same, not having fondness for wild beasts."

"Then where did you see Julius?"

"In own house, inspector. Mr. Julius was paying visit to Dutt home which is quite near from Dumdum Road."

"When was this?"

"Quite one hour ago, inspector. Contrarywise to usual temperate habits was not yet on point of retiring, unusual circumstances being presence of Cousin Danilal Dutt from Barrackpore, as honoured guest. Cousin Danilal was quite amused by crimson hues of Mr. Julius's face. . . ."

"What did Julius want?" interrupted Prike, drumming impatiently with his fingers on the desk.

"He was in state of great perturbation," the Babu replied. "He said, 'Babu, I am possessing important information regarding murder of your late deceased employer, Mr. Hoyt. Am highly anxious to make same know to Inspector Prike, but unfortunate conditions are impelling me to not expose self in conversation with C.I.D. You will be performing immense service, Babu, by hastening to inform Inspector Prike that I am awaiting him in Dumdum Road premises.'"

At last Inspector Prike arose. "Was Rufus Dormer with Julius?" he asked.

"Unfortunately such was not case," the Babu replied. "Dormer obligation remains unliquidated."

Inspector Prike whipped a revolver from his pocket, reassured himself that it was loaded, then casually replaced it.

"Shall we proceed to Dumdum Road, gentlemen?" he suggested.

Deputy Inspector Robbins was already out the door when the Babu touched Prike timidly on the sleeve.

"But you will be having no further requirement for my services, inspector?" he pleaded.

"You will accompany me," the inspector replied without looking at him.

"But Cousin Danilal is anxiously anticipating return——"

"Come," said Prike. He grasped the Babu's flabby biceps. The slightly-bowed legs of Dundranesh Dutt wobbled as the inspector pushed him from the room. . . .

A misshapen, blood-red moon stared ominously through the black silhouettes of stiff *tal* palms, as Inspector Prike's motor-car rolled slowly past the transient menagerie in Dumdum Road. The white stucco façade glowed faintly in the night. Three stories of barred windows made dark patches like pairs of sightless eyes. No light gleamed, but Prike had expected none. There were no living quarters in the building, which Kurt Julius used merely as a storage place for the animals between shipments to Europe and America. Fifty yards beyond the animal hotel Prike ordered the motor to stop.

"I'll reconnoitre," said Prike to Deputy Inspector Robbins and the two constables in the car. "You stay here with the Babu until I call you."

Inspector Prike strode briskly along a row of one-story, mud-and-bamboo shanties until he reached the heavy double doors leading into the animal hotel. There he paused a moment listening. From the interior came a confused, muted muttering like an uneasy breath of wind in the jungle. He could distinguish throaty snarls from some captive feline, the nervous chattering of monkeys, the guttural complaint of some snorting beast. Cautiously Prike put his hand on the great brass door-handle, turned it. The door was locked. He let the handle slowly back into place,

walked around the corner of the building, headed towards the rear.

The three-story part of the structure extended back only fifty feet from the road. Behind it was an enclosed compound, surrounded by a ten-foot wall in which Julius kept his larger animals. Prike skirted the wall for a dozen paces then again stopped to listen. From somewhere near the river came the mournful howl of a jackal baying at the moon. Inside the compound a hyena raised his mocking voice in answer. Instantly the whole of Julius's menagerie joined in a blatant, bellowing, roaring clamour.

Suddenly Prike began walking again, quickly, tensely. He had seen the figure of a man outlined briefly in a lurid splash of moonlight beyond the end of the compound wall. The man loomed for a split-second, then vanished around the corner.

A gun glinted in the inspector's hand as he hurried towards the end of the wall, rounded the corner. Something stirred in the moon-shadows piled deep ahead of him.

"Stop! I'll shoot!" The command rang sonorously.

The only reply was the quick pounding of retreating footsteps, the flash of a white coat disappearing behind the far angle of the wall.

The hot night air shuddered as jagged flame thundered from Prike's revolver.

The brute howling of the animal chorus swelled to a new crescendo inside the compound as the inspector's nimble feet sped in the direction of the shot. Prike's forefinger took up the trigger slack. He leaped from the shadow of the wall, doubled the corner, pulled up short. He had almost collided with a tall, broad-shouldered young man, who stood motionless with his hands raised. The man was bare-headed and his hair shone faintly red in the moonlight. Deputy Inspector

Robbins and the two constables, attracted by the shot, arrived on the run, with Gundranesh Dutt in tow. Prike put away his revolver.

"Why didn't you stop, Mr. Marvin?" he asked quietly. "Tired of living?"

"I . . . I didn't know it was you, inspector." Lee Marvin lowered his hands.

"You were expecting some one else?"

"No one in particular."

"Just out for the walk, I suppose?"

Marvin's shoulders drew back perceptibly. "I wasn't aware," he said, "that a man couldn't walk in Dumdum Road after dark, without being shot at. I'm sorry."

"You might be considerably sorrier if I had aimed a few inches lower," said Inspector Prike. "You might not have been in condition to make your scheduled visit to Mr. Kurt Julius. Or perhaps you've already seen him."

"I have not," Marvin declared.

"Then we may as well make a party of it," said Prike. "Shall we all go in?"

The group moved to the front of the animal hotel. Prike stepped to the double doors and paused with his fingers on the handle.

"No doubt you have the key, Mr. Marvin," he said, extending his other hand.

Before Marvin could reply the brass door-handle twisted downward under pressure of Prike's fingers, and the doors swung slowly inward. The gaping darkness exhaled the foul reek of caged animals. Prike frowned, puzzled. Over his shoulder he asked, "You still insist, Mr. Marvin, that you have not been inside this building?"

"Definitely," Marvin replied.

"This door was locked ten minutes ago," said Prike.

"Robbins, have you seen any one enter or leave this place?"

"I couldn't say, inspector," Robbins answered. "You said I was to stay in the motor-car, and this side of the house being pretty much in shadow, I couldn't see much of what might be going on, not being an owl."

Prike again faced the open doors.

"Kurt Julius!" he called.

His voice echoed strangely above the din of animal noises. No answer came.

A pencil of light sprang from the flash-lamp in the inspector's hand. The beam swept the darkness, pausing for an instant on a half-open door leading to a small office at the right. Prike went in. The disc of light danced over the walls, floor and furniture, revealing nothing except that Julius seldom used the office. There was dust on the desk and chairs.

"You hold on down here, Robbins," said Prike, "I'm going to have a look above."

The restless eye of the inspector's flashlight explored the stone stairway and the upper floors. The brilliant plumage of cages upon cages of tropical birds flared brightly before the searching lamp—twittering, feathered mites; proud Burmese peacocks; Imperial pheasants from Tibet. Scores of black and grey monkeys jabbered and grimaced as the inspector passed. Small, sharp-nosed mammals bared white fangs at him through wire-gratings. But there was no sign of Kurt Julius here nor on the floor piled with sacks and bales of feed. Prike went downstairs again. His little group was standing in the fetid darkness.

"Leave one of your constables by the door, Robbins," Prike ordered. "The rest of you come with me."

Pushing open the iron grille that barred the way to the compound, Prike swung his flashlight beam slowly about the rectangle of cages. A hundred savage eyes

flung back luminous points of cold green radiance. The stench was stifling.

"Julius!" Prike called again.

An elephant calf, chained by one foot to a ring embedded in the cement floor, raised its trunk and trumpeted shrilly. Once more the compound was a roaring, howling bedlam. The shrieking of marmosets made a hideous counterpoint to the potent, cruelly-vibrant bass of a tiger, the cry of a black panther.

With deliberate, measured strides, Inspector Prike moved along this array of sleek, captive ferocity. The disc of his flashlight glistened for a moment on a tank of giant water-lizards, rippled over the scaly tangle of two boxed pythons, flamed for an instant on the vivid stripes of a Bengal tiger. Abruptly he stopped.

A new voice had joined the deafening din of frightened beasts—a human voice, so shrill with terror that its despairing scream was almost inhuman. It was the voice of Babu Gundranesh Dutt who, his eyes starting from their sockets, pointed a trembling, pudgy finger as he shrieked, "Inspector Sahib! Look!"

The inspector's flashlight followed the Babu's finger. The light encircled a splotch of crimson upon the cement floor, then moved away, following a thick serpent of blood that squirmed towards the cages. The inspector darted forward.

Lying beside the cage of a snarling cheetah was Kurt Julius. Except for the vicious red marks of a great claw from ear to ear, his once sanguine face was grey with death.

CHAPTER XIII

EVEN the police surgeon from the Bow Bazaar *thana*, whom Prike summoned although the case was not officially in his jurisdiction, had to admit reluctantly that Kurt Julius might conceivably have been murdered. At least, the surgeon agreed after a cursory examination of the body, Julius had not been killed by the cheetah in front of whose cage he had been found. In fact, from the posthumous appearance of the wounds and the relatively small amount of bleeding, it seemed likely that the claw-marks on the dead man's face had been made a few seconds before or after life had become extinct.

"In other words," suggested Inspector Prike when the puzzled surgeon announced his findings, "Julius probably collapsed in front of the cage and was clawed through the bars as he lay dying."

"Probably," said the police surgeon, "unless the claw marks were made deliberately to throw us off, it's a pure coincidence. There seems to be no skull fracture and, as far as I can see, death has not been caused by external violence. Damned queer, inspector. I begin to see your point about this Hoyt business. Naturally you'll want me to cut this chap open."

"At once," the inspector replied.

Prike appeared to be paying little attention to what the surgeon was saying. He was intently examining the concrete floor in the vicinity of the cheetah cage. Bent almost double, he followed the slow, rhythmic swing of his flashlight as it flung grotesque patterns of light and shadow against the restive, shifting background of imprisoned animals. Foot by foot he

advanced through malodorous darkness that quivered with throaty sounds, past the chained elephant, past the screeching marmosets, past the uneasily-pacing hyenas. He had almost reached the grill on the Dumdum Road side when his eager fingers snatched something from the ground.

Straightening up, Prike brought the gleaming lens of his flashlight close to the object in his other hand. A studious frown wrinkled his high-arched forehead as he contemplated a well-chewed cigar butt which had been smoked to within an inch of the end. Carefully placing the butt in a small manila envelope which he extracted from his wallet, he walked rapidly towards the office just off the street door where, by the insect-dimmed light of a kerosene lamp, Deputy Inspector Robbins was enthusiastically brow-beating Lee Marvin and Babu Gundranesh Dutt.

"Here's your man, inspector!" exclaimed Robbins as Prike entered. "Marvin's your 'Raffles.' He's the one that was inside this house when you found the door locked. He's your murderer!"

Inspector Prike scrutinised Marvin's worried features. There was anxiety in the clear blue eyes of the tall red-head, but not fear.

"What makes you think so, Robbins?" Prike asked.

"Simple, inspector. Can't be any doubt about it. Look here." Robbins extended his hand. On his palm lay two detachable silver buttons made of old Siamese money that had been carved to resemble tiger heads. "Recognise these, inspector?"

Prike took the buttons and examined them casually. "Belonged to Julius, didn't they?" he said without great show of interest.

"Exactly!" crowed Robbins. "And this Marvin had them in his pocket. If that ain't proof that he's

been in here with the dead man, then my name ain't Robbins."

Inspector Prike turned his cold, professional gaze upon Marvin. "What's your story?" he asked curtly.

"Why, I was explaining to this constable here——"

"Constable, my left tibia!" Robbins exploded.

"You're talking to Deputy Inspector Robbins, and no nonsense about it. . . . Inspector, this bloke's been telling me some cock and bull story about picking up one of these buttons when it popped off of Julius's coat in Hoyt's office yesterday. He says he found the other one in his own apartment to-night. Says he's got no idea how it got there."

"That's the truth," Marvin insisted.

"Truth, my left tibia!" said Deputy Inspector Robbins. "*Jhuth*, you mean."

Inspector Prike rattled the silver buttons in his closed hand for an instant, like a pair of dice. Then he handed them to Robbins.

"The regularity with which Mr. Marvin pops up in the immediate vicinity of each new corpse we find, is positively uncanny," said Inspector Prike to his subordinate. "Whether his presence here is a sign of sinister complicity, as you believe, Robbins, or mere blundering coincidence, I'm not yet ready to say. However, I do think we should permit him to roam about a while longer. If we watch him carefully, he may lead us into something really significant. So I'm not taking him into custody yet, Robbins."

Deputy Inspector Robbins leaped up indignantly.

"You can't be turning him loose like this, inspector!" he expostulated. "If he ain't guilty, then the Hooghly ain't muddy!"

"I think you'd better go home and get some sleep, Mr. Marvin," said Prike.

"But those buttons, inspector!" Robbins was outraged.

Inspector Prike almost smiled as he turned back to his deputy.

"I admit, Robbins," he said, "that Mr. Marvin's actions during the past twenty-four hours have been highly unusual. He has strange, old-fashioned, romantic notions—that a man should always lie, even at great jeopardy to himself, to protect a lady, for instance. Otherwise I find him not devoid of intelligence, Robbins, and therefore I can't believe he knew that Julius was dead inside this building. If he knew, he would have thrown away those buttons; he had plenty of opportunity while I was chasing him."

"But somebody was inside this building, inspector. Somebody unlocked the door. If it wasn't Marvin——"

"It wasn't, Robbins." Prike gave the deputy inspector a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Because I happen to know who it was. Good-night, Mr. Marvin."

While Robbins watched in open-mouthed disappointment, Marvin quietly voiced his gratitude and made a hasty departure. He had scarcely left when Babu Gundranesh Dutt pounced upon Inspector Prike with a wail of despair, his fat, brown hands clutching the inspector's wrist in their perspiring grasp.

"Am greatly fearing, Inspector Sahib," the Babu moaned, "that by procedure of elimination you will be attributing felonious murders to me."

"Your conscience bothers you, Babu?" Prike asked.

"Quite contrarywise," Gundranesh Dutt protested, wagging his big head. "Conscience is tranquil as new-born babe. However, having been last eye-witness to penultimate moments in life of Kurt Julius, am greatly fearing that cast-iron chain of circumstantial evidence may give false impression——"

"In that case, Babu," interrupted Prike quietly,

"Perhaps you'd better come back to the *thana* with us."

The Babu covered his face with his hands then with a mighty sigh he lifted his head proudly.

"Inspector Sahib." Despite his heroic posture the Babu's voice was still a wail. "Will you kindly send message to Mrs. Dutt and Cousin Danilal relating that head of Dutt household is maintaining innocence, despite prospect of disgrace."

Babu Gundranesh Dutt persisted in maintaining his innocence for the next hour, despite the fact that it was never really challenged by Inspector Prike. Actually, during the succeeding interview at the Bow Bazaar police station, Prike seemed curiously unconcerned with the death of Kurt Julius. His questioning of the Babu was occupied almost exclusively with the office routine of Harrison J. Hoyt.

"Tell me, Babu," Prike asked, "how often has Chitterji Rao been calling at Mr. Hoyt's office?"

"Only in past weeks have visits attained great frequency," was the reply.

"You know, of course, the object of his visits?"

The Babu wagged his head evasively. "Am not afflicted with reprehensible habit of eavesdropping," he said.

"But you do know of certain jewels belonging to the Maharajah of Jharnpur."

"No," the Babu answered, looking at his fat brown hands. Perspiration broke out afresh on his round face.

"You do not?" The inspector's unswerving glance said, "Liar."

Not officially," the Babu amended.

But you have seen the gems?"

From slight distance."

When did you see them last?"

"At evening-time. Before departing for bachelor banquet, my employer removed same from safe."

"Did Chitterji Rao call at the office prior to this?"

"Yes. Approximately two hours prior."

"And the Maharajah's jewellery was in Hoyt's safe while Chitterji Rao was in the office?"

"Quite presumably."

"Then why did not Hoyt hand over the jewels to the Maharajah's household officer?"

"Am unable to state, sar."

"Was Hoyt buying these jewels from Chitterji Rao?"

"Am of contrary opinion, sar. Money was mentioned, sar—in small fragments of conversation unavoidably overheard—but same was being demanded by Mr. Hoyt, not *from* Mr. Hoyt."

"Why?"

"Am unable to state, sar."

"Would it be because Hoyt was seeking payment for recovering the jewels from a third party?"

"Quite presumably, sar."

"Who was the third party?"

Gundranesh Dutt shrugged with despair at his own ignorance. He did not know why. Neither did he know the answers to the dozen other questions which Prike fired at him in rapid succession. How had Hoyt procured the *nao-ratna*? For what consideration had Hoyt undertaken to restore it to the Maharajah? Did Rufus Dormer know of the transaction? Did Dormer have any part in the loss of the *nao-ratna*? In its recovery? At last the Babu flung up his hands in hopeless bewilderment.

"Am quite completely uninformed," he cried. "Regret exceedingly if somewhat inaccurate reply to previous question gave impression of habitual prevarication. Am telling truth exclusively, Inspector Sahib, for past fifteen minutes. However, am aware that

iron chain of circumstantial evidence cannot be disregarded. . . ."

Again Inspector Prike almost smiled. "You had better go home to Mrs. Dutt and Cousin Danilal," he said.

"You are completely exonerating me, inspector Sahib?"

"Temporarily," said Prike. "At least until tomorrow morning. Good-night."

The barrel-like contours of Gundranesh Dutt had scarcely disappeared through one doorway before Deputy Inspector Robbins entered through another.

"Going to call it a day, inspector?" he asked.

Inspector Prike was drumming thoughtfully on the desk with his fingertips. "You run along, Robbins," he said, "I'm stopping on here until I get a report from the surgeon."

Resignedly the deputy inspector lowered himself into a chair across from Prike. Officially he had been off duty since midnight, but he was not to be outdone by Prike even in the matter of going without sleep. When the inspector had been working on the Tollygunj Gymkhana murders neither he nor Robbins had gone to bed for fifty hours.

"I'll stick it with you," said Robbins. "I suppose you got this menagerie murder all figured out already."

"The motive is simple enough," Prike answered. "Julius was probably killed because he happened to sit next to Hoyt at the banquet that night; certainly because he saw something that he should not have. Our problem resolves itself into a simple process of elimination of Hoyt's enemies. As to the method—Hello, that's probably the surgeon now."

The telephone rang. Prike lifted the receiver.

"Yes, doctor. . . . You did. . . . ? Quick work, doctor. I appreciate it. . . . Yes. . . . I see. . . .

You shouldn't be surprised, doctor. I'm not. . . . You'll save the stomach for Dr. Chaudry, won't you. . . . ? Just ship it over in the morning. . . . Cheer-ho, doctor."

"Well ? " Robbins leaned forward as Prike hung up.

"The surgeon is amazed," said Prike, "to discover identical conditions in the interior of Mr. Julius as he found in Mr. Hoyt. Death was due to respiratory failure——"

"I beg your pardon."

"Paralysis of the lungs, if you'd rather," Prike continued, "and unusual dilatation of the heart—all without apparent cause."

"I'll be damned," said Robbins.

Prike arose and buttoned his coat. "Coming along, Robbins ? " he asked.

"Where to ? "

"I'm going to pick up the man," Prike announced, producing a manila envelope and holding it so Robbins could see the cigar butt inside, "who dropped this in Kurt Julius's animal-house to-night."

"And who might that be ? " Robbins frowned into the envelope.

"Unless I have lost my flair for judging Trichinopoly cheroots," said Prike, "this butt is the remains of a smoke I gave three hours ago to a man named Rufus Dormer."

CHAPTER XIV

LEE MARVIN picked up a *ghari* near Barrackpore Bridge. The walk of nearly a mile through the warm night, between shadowy rows of peepul trees aglow with the pulsating light of fireflies, had done little to resolve the confusion of his thoughts. He was still badly shaken by having just been face to face with the second corpse that day. Moreover, despite Inspector Prike's apparent disbelief of his actual guilt, he was becoming definitely more entangled in the sinister web which Harrison Hoyt had spun.

Each new turn of the *ghari* wheels, as they rattled down Cornwallis Street, seemed to bring fresh questions to Marvin's mind. Why had Evelyn Branch flung one of Kurt Julius's silver buttons at him as she left his flat? Where had she got it? From Julius himself? From George Linnet? From Hoyt, himself, since the girl admitted seeing him the night of the bachelor dinner? Had the girl anticipated that the sight of the tiny carved button would send him scurrying off to Dumdum Road in time to be suspected of the murder of Julius? She could not know, of course, that he had picked up a similar button in Hoyt's office the day before, but the tiger-head buttons of the dead animal buyer were well known in every bar in Calcutta. Should he have told Prike about the girl's visit instead of again trying to protect her, after the antagonistic attitude she had taken? Should he confront Evelyn Branch and demand an explanation? Should he find George Linnet?

As the hoof-beats of the bony *ghari* horse echoed through the stillness of Bow Bazaar Street, Marvin was on the point of stopping at the police station to

divulge a piece of information he had deliberately withheld from Deputy Inspector Robbins in Dumdum Road for the simple reason that Robbins had never asked him for it. On second thought he decided to keep the information to himself for a while longer—at least until he had determined its significance. He looked at his watch. One thirty-five. He might still have time to act to-night. He leaned forward and gave the *ghariwalla* the address of *Anglo-Bengal Times* offices. . . .

A sleepy *chokidar* roused himself and salaamed as Marvin got out of the *ghari* in the compound of the newspaper office. The tall red-head entered the building and paused a moment at the entrance to the composing-room, listening to the light brassy tinkle of linotype matrices dropping into place. Lights streamed from under a dozen green shades to glisten upon the bare, brown backs of the native compositors setting type, letter by letter, in a language they did not understand. Seeing no European about, Marvin went upstairs to the editorial rooms.

A strange, almost tangible quiet pervaded the upper floor. The usual bustle of journalism was choked to a whisper by the inertia of ages, the whirl of western enterprise reduced to a faint eddy in the unhurried flow of a civilisation four thousand years old. In a bare, high-ceilinged office, two *punkas*, rotating feebly overhead, made no more impression on the damp, nocturnal heat than the twentieth-century presence of electric lights disturbed the somnolence of ancient India which hung heavily upon the atmosphere. Marvin saw a brown office-boy, in dirty white *dhoti* and red turban twice as big as his head drowsing against the copy-chute. He saw three Eurasian sub-editors seated at a long table, writing laboriously in long hand. He saw a fourth editing late Reuter despatches with scissors and paste-pot. He did not see Rufus Dormer.

Marvin looked about him. He knew that Dormer worked with the night staff on Mondays and Fridays but saw no sign of him. If Dormer had gone home, Marvin would never be able to see him to-night, for none of his colleagues knew his address. He was vaguely suspected of living in the Mohammedan quarter somewhere north of Harrison Road, probably with a low-caste native woman, although none of his associates had ever taken the trouble to inquire. Dormer was simply not interesting to them socially. He was interesting professionally, despite his cynical lack of sympathy with the culture of his own race, because he had a brilliant mind, a clever pen, and because he received a ridiculously small salary—so small that the owners of the *Anglo-Bengal Times* despised him for accepting it.

Marvin had just concluded he had missed connections with Dormer when a voice from the shadows behind the sub-editors' table droned, "*Koi hai?*"

The red-turbaned office-boy stirred himself to a state of comparative wakefulness, shuffled away from the copy-chute, yawned, pushed open a door and vanished. Marvin leaped after him; he had recognised the voice.

In a suffocating cubicle, where his unhygienic personality could be kept from the sensitive eyes and nostrils of distinguished visitors to the editorial rooms, sat Rufus Dormer. He was handing a sheaf of copy to the office boy when Marvin entered. Dormer was surprised at first; then the stock sneer he reserved for his own people wrinkled his upper lip.

"Up pretty late for a bearer of the white man's burden," said Dormer. "What's addling your massive intellect? Some new plan to help the lowly *rayot* live on two pounds a year?"

Marvin ignored the renegade journalist's sarcastic greeting. Pressing both his moist palms against the

edge of Dormer's desk, he leaned far forward, and without further preliminaries, asked, "Dormer, what were you doing at Kurt Julius's animal-house in Dumdum Road to-night?"

Dormer's sneer persisted but it assumed a peculiar frozen quality.

"I wasn't there," he said. "If I were, it would probably have been to sell Kurt some rare skunks. I know several. . . ."

"I wouldn't be facetious, Dormer."

Dormer laughed. "You're not turning out to be an amateur detective, are you, Marvin?" he asked. "What's the matter? Aren't you doing enough for the glory of Western culture by robbing India of its mineral wealth?"

"You were in Dumdum Road to-night, Dormer."

"I was not."

"I saw you. You came out of Julius's place a little after midnight—in a great hurry."

Rufus Dormer's sneer straightened into a thin, grim line. He stood up. His black-bordered fingernails nervously combed his shaggy hair as he glowered silently at Marvin. Then a ghost of the sneer came back.

"If I were you, Marvin," he said, "I wouldn't boast about being in Dumdum Road to-night. Some one might think you killed Kurt Julius—because he knew you killed Hoyt."

"How do you know Julius is dead?" Marvin's voice was sharp, accusing.

Dormer's small, glittering eyes fixed Marvin for a long instant before he replied.

"I saw the body," he said. "That accounts for my haste in leaving, which you remarked a moment ago. I'm not fond of corpses."

"No doubt you merely dropped in for a friendly call on the hyenas. . . ."

"What difference can that possibly make to your superior Occidental intelligence?" Dormer's restless fingers explored the sparseness of his moth-eaten moustache.

"I happen to be very much interested," said Marvin.

"But my business with the late Mr. Julius happens to be none of yours."

Marvin straightened up. "Very well, if you'd rather explain to the C.I.D.," he announced, "I'll be glad to tell Inspector Prike that I saw you in Dumdum Road. Until now, I've neglected to mention it."

Abruptly Marvin spun on his heel and strode towards the door.

"Hold on, Marvin." At Dormer's words, Marvin stopped but he did not turn around. "Are you a C.I.D. agent?"

"Of course not." Slowly Marvin came back to Dormer's desk.

"Then of course your consideration for me is purely altruistic," said Dormer, dryly. "You're acting purely out of pity for a renegade European who has lost caste with the dominant race, without even gaining the respect of the Hindus whom he admires. . . ."

"My motives are purely selfish," said Marvin. "You know very well that I've been mixed up with Hoyt—involuntarily. I happen to be in so deep that I've got to plough through to the other side, instead of backing out. What do you know about a *nao-ratna* belonging to the Maharajah of Jharnpur, that Hoyt—?"

"So that's it!" interrupted Dormer with a grin.

"What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. Only bazaar talk."

"Where is the *nao-ratna*? Did Kurt Julius have it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"That's why you went to see Julius to-night, isn't it?"

"It is not."

"You're lying to me."

"That," said Dormer, "is my privilege as a renegade white."

"Are you going to tell me why you went to see Julius?"

"No."

"You are," said Marvin, "because I happen to be able to insist."

The scrawny little journalist bristled. His lips twitched. He seemed on the point of parrying Marvin's insistence with more sarcasm but something in the cool determination of the other's stare stripped him of his usual insolence. With a conciliatory shrug, he said:

"I went to Julius for money. I needed five hundred rupees. Julius promised to take care of me when I saw him at the Grand Hotel after Prike left, but he got away from me in Corporation Street. When I found him again in Dumdum Road he was dead."

"What was the money for?"

"A personal matter."

"Why did you go to Julius?"

"Because Hoyt owed me the money and Julius had promised Hoyt a good deal more than that."

Marvin lit a cigarette. "I see," he said. "You're carrying on Mr. Hoyt's blackmail?"

"I needed five hundred rupees."

"Badly?"

"Desperately."

"Desperately enough—to kill a man?"

Dormer smiled pityingly. "Even as an amateur you're not a very good detective, Marvin," he said. "My credit rating in Calcutta may be less than zero, but at least my intelligence quotient is high enough to let me realise that Julius would be worth more to me alive than dead."

Marvin shook his head. He was getting nowhere. Dormer argued logically enough, but that was a sign of mental agility, rather than honesty. Why should Dormer tell him the truth anyhow? Still . . . He looked out the small window which was the only means of ventilation in Dormer's cubicle. Just below was the glow from the skylight in a wing of the composing-room that jutted out beyond the second story. Beyond, a sudden rain-squall was beating furiously upon the uneven tiled roof of a low outbuilding. Marvin whirled abruptly.

From the adjoining sub-editor's room came sounds of a mild commotion—chairs scraping along the floor, men speaking. One voice Marvin knew instantly, a crisp, authoritative voice with the cold, latent power of a coiled spring. Evidently Dormer, too, knew the voice for his lips were white as he advanced on Marvin.

"Damn you!" he murmured, scarcely opening his mouth. Then he sprang at Marvin, his scrawny body galvanised into a fury of activity. Hammering and clawing with fists that opened and closed spasmodically he caught the heavier man by surprise, drove him off balance, beat him back from the window. Marvin recoiled, set himself, launched a long, defensive left. Dormer ducked, then leaped for the window-sill.

At the same moment Inspector Prike pushed open the door. He saw Dormer crouched in the window-frame. His arm went back. Gunmetal gleamed in his hand—a split-second too late. Dormer was gone!

In one bound, Prike crossed the room. The sights of his gun swung into line against a whiteish blur through the window. But he did not fire.

There was a cry, the crash and jangle of broken glass.

Prike and Marvin stared down through a jagged opening in the broken skylight to the composing-room.

The composing-room was in an uproar when Prike

reached it, through the more conventional stairway, a minute later. The half-naked compositors left their keyboards and were running about, shouting. The white-bearded make-up man was gesticulating to the Bengali foreman over the ruins of wooden type-cases which had stood directly beneath the broken skylight. The floor was strewn with a silvery shower of linotype slugs, pied type and shattered glass.

"It was Mr. Dormer, sir," said the Bengali foreman, as Prike was observing a thin trail of blood leading away from the wreckage. "Although he has never made entrance in similar manner before."

"Where did he go?" demanded Deputy Inspector Robbins, who had just rushed in from the front compound where he had been waiting.

Inspector Prike's thumb indicated the direction of the blood drops.

"Hurry, Robbins," said Prike, "you may get him before he scales the outbuildings in the rear compound. He's been hurt."

"But not badly, sar," said the Bengali foreman. "Fall was cushioned by upper-and-lower case, eighteen and twenty-four point Cheltenham bold face and italics. He received only torn clothings and slight cuts on forehead. He——"

But Inspector Prike was not listening. He had gone through the back of the composing-room to the rear compound where Deputy Inspector Robbins was shining his flashlight in the startled faces of sleepy natives, whom he routed from the outbuildings. No, they had seen no one. They had heard nothing except the crash of breaking glass. If any one had gone over the rain-wet roof, they knew nothing of it.

Rufus Dormer had disappeared, as if by some prodigious feat of oriental magic.

CHAPTER XV

EVELYN BRANCH awoke with a start. The fingers of her right hand clutched the perspiration-soaked pillow as she sat up very straight. What had wakened her? She peered into the warm darkness. The hazel of her mosquito-netting gave a grotesque nightmarish indistinctness to the unfamiliar objects of her room in Mrs. Pereira's boarding house. The *punka* motor, whirring overhead, spat lurid sparks, which gave her awakening the same unreality as the febrile dreams troubling her fitful sleep since her return from Marvin's flat. She listened. Above the pounding of her heart and the faint clucking sounds of a chameleon on the picture moulding she heard only the distinct wrangling of coolies. Suddenly a loud, insistent banging resounded on the door. Evelyn lifted the mosquito bar, swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Who's there?" she called.

A booming masculine voice answered from the other side of the door, "A message for Miss Branch, please."

The girl fumbled for the greenish spot of luminosity on her night table. The hands of her watch marked nearly one o'clock.

"I'll get it in the morning," she said.

"But it is important."

"Slip it under the door, then."

"I cannot. The chit requires an immediate answer."

"Wait then," The girl got up, drew a dressing-gown over her shoulders, switched on the light. She unlocked the door, opened it a crack. As she snatched a large envelope which a brown hand extended she

caught a glimpse of a purple turban and gleaming white teeth. Quickly she pushed the door shut, leaned against it as she ripped open the envelope. The communication, written in a vertical, highly ornamental, copperplate hand, read :

" I am commanded by His Highness the Maharajah, to request the immediate presence of Miss Evelyn Branch at the Palace of His Highness in Alipore.

" *Chitterji Rao,*

" Household Officer to H.H.

" The Maharajah of Jharnpur."

Evelyn read the chit three times before the words made any impression on her. Even then they failed to make sense. Who was this Chitterji Rao and why did he summon her in the middle of the night? She did not even know the Maharajah of Jharnpur. What did he want with her? George Linnet had something to do with it, of course. . . .

" Are you coming now, please ? " demanded the bass voice behind the closed door.

" At one in the morning ? Naturally not," Evelyn retorted.

" His Highness has sent a motor-car. It is waiting outside."

" But I'm not dressed."

" I will wait ten minutes."

" I'm sorry but I see no reason why I shouldn't see the Maharajah in the morning just as well." There was both indignation and breathless fear in the girl's voice. " I'm not in the habit of paying midnight calls to men, particularly a man I have never met."

The reply from the man behind the door was a curious low-pitched laugh that was half a sigh and half the meaningless chuckle of a maniac. The over-

tones of that throaty, mirthless laugh touched Evelyn with a chill sense of foreboding that tingled at the roots of her hair and crawled down her spine. She turned the key in the lock.

"You had better come to-night, Miss Branch." The voice behind the door rumbled ominously. "His Highness cannot be disappointed. It is to your—very best interests—to come at once."

Again came that chilling laugh which was completely devoid of any amusement except the sadistic anticipation of threat. By this time Evelyn was thoroughly frightened. She was afraid of the man in the purple turban, terrified at the prospect of riding through the night at the command of an unknown Oriental potentate; yet something sinister in that low, mocking laughter behind the door made her even more terrified at what might happen if she refused.

"Very well," she said. "Wait. I'll get dressed."

With fingers made clumsy by haste and apprehension she performed a hurried toilet. She placed the note from Chitterji Rao prominently on the night-table—as a clue to searchers in case she did not return. Then she opened the door.

The man in the purple turban salaamed so abjectly that the exaggeration could only be sarcasm. Then he escorted the girl downstairs. A long, sleek motor-car was waiting outside in Guru's Lane. A resplendent footman opened the door and Evelyn got in.

As the headlights of the motor swung south and bored through the Indian night, a rain squall swept across the Maidan from the Hooghly to burst upon the city with tropical suddenness. The huge drops roared upon the roof of the car, slanted through the headlight beams like stream of molten metal, danced madly in the quickly flooded streets. Inside the speeding car Evelyn Branch sat very stiff and very

straight, yet mentally she was cowering at the violence of the storm. Each livid flash of heat lightning revealed to her the man in the purple turban, leaning back in the opposite corner with his arms folded. He had made no attempt to touch her and had not spoken a word after leaving Guru's Lane, yet his presence was a constant reminder that she had only the vaguest idea of where she was going. She was a fool to have come. Would she have been a bigger fool in refusing? Was she actually being taken to the palace of the Maharajah or did the man in the purple turban represent some new element in an intrigue which was hourly becoming more complex?

Her thoughts careened back through the weeks until she saw herself seated prosaically behind a typewriter, answering telephones, with no more serious worries than an inconvenient appointment with the hairdresser or an evening gown that had shrunk at the cleaners. Then another lightning flash unveiled the rain-blurred minarets of a mosque, a disconsolate group of humped-back oxen huddled like grey spectres under the lashing fronds of ghostly palms; and always, in his corner, the man with the purple turban. She shuddered. She found it hard to believe that she was actually awake and not living some delirious fantasy. . . .

The rain ceased abruptly as the car sped past the Alipore Zoological Gardens. A few minutes later the wheels skidded to a stop. Evelyn pressed her face against the glass. The glow from the headlights outlined an imposing array of grey towers and Indo-Persian domes. The man in the purple turban got out, held the door open, and salaamed.

"Please, Miss Branch."

Evelyn followed through a tall, pointed Baghdad arch. A detachment of gaudy Jharnpur guards stood

at attention as she passed, their brilliant orange turbans flaming like torches in the gloom.

"This way, please."

Evelyn was led through vaulted stone corridors, across flagged courtyards. She was aware of murmured commands in Hindustani, the clank of swords, the patter of bare feet. Her heels clicked on stone steps, then sank silently into the deep pile of a rug as the man in the purple turban stopped to talk to an A.D.C. in a long green coat. A door swung open.

"This way, please."

At the end of another corridor, along which a dozen oil lights flickered in blue glass bowls, Evelyn turned a corner—and blinked. She was standing on the threshold of a room that was filled with a strange radiance. Thousands of tiny mirrors embedded in the walls and ceiling scintillated with the light of a great hanging Cairene lamp. When her eyes became accustomed to the queer flashing pattern of the myriad reflections, Evelyn saw a man arising from a mound of satin cushions. He put aside the mouthpiece of a hookah as he said :

"Hello, sister. I've been all in an uproar, waiting for you."

"Waiting for me, Colonel ? " If Evelyn was relieved to see the familiar rectangular face of George Linnet in these bizarre surroundings, she did not show it. She smiled, but she remained poised on the threshold.

"Sure," said George Linnet. "Didn't I send for you? "

"Did you? Since when have you been elected Maharajah of Jharnpur? "

Linnet grinned as he walked across the room to take Evelyn's arm.

"I'm just helping out around the house," he said.

"The perfect week-end guest. But the Maharajah wants to see you, all right."

"Where is he, then?"

"He's in bed," said Linnet.

The girl flushed. "So was I," she declared, "before some one turned in this false alarm. Say, what is this, anyway? A rib?"

"A rib made the first woman," said Linnet hopefully,

"If you insist, I'll laugh," Evelyn retorted, "but don't get the idea that I climbed out of bed in the middle of the night to listen to your bad puns."

She was suddenly uneasy under Linnet's ocular caress. Ever since she had stepped into the room she had the sensation of being pawed, mentally. Linnet was physically attractive; he had proved an exceedingly pleasant shipboard companion, and she liked him well enough to have confided in him that afternoon; but she did not relish the X-ray quality in his gaze as it rose slowly from her trim ankles. She moved away a step.

Linnet retained hold of her arm. With brutal abruptness he pulled her against him, kissed her savagely.

Evelyn turned her head. She froze into impersonal immobility, as she felt his lips on her cheek.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked when she could disengage her lips. "Slap your face?"

"You're a damned cute little trick," said Linnet. Hungrily he kissed the hollow of her shoulder.

Evelyn pushed her hands against his chest, managed a few inches of breathing room.

"This is even less fun than listening to your bad puns," she said.

Linnet raised his head. "Why don't you stop pretending?"

"I'm not pretending. I've never said anything to you that I didn't mean, and I'm not beginning now when I say I'm going home."

"Please don't go yet, Miss Branch," said a voice behind her.

She turned. A Hindu in a long black coat was coming toward her. The tail of his almond-green turban was draped over one shoulder.

"I am Chitterji Rao," he said. "His Highness, who has retired, asked me to receive you—but I see Colonel Linnet has already done the honours. Will you sit down?" The sweep of his hand indicated the pile of cushions. "Or shall I have some European chairs brought?"

"I prefer to stand," said Evelyn Branch, looking at Linnet.

Chitterji Rao made a sound in his throat like the purring of a monstrous cat.

"You are very charming to have come to-night," he said. "Did you bring it with you?"

"Bring what?" Evelyn again looked at Linnet. Linnet laughed.

"The *nao-ratna*," said Chitterji Rao.

Evelyn appeared puzzled.

"The *nao-ratna*," explained Linnet, "is a sort of necklace that has the Bosa pearl as a pendant."

"Oh."

"And Colonel Linnet tells me that you were going to the flat of Mr. Lee Marvin to-night to get the pearl. Did you get it?"

"No, I didn't."

Chitterji Rao laughed softly as he glanced at a streak of lipstick on Linnet's cheek. "I smile," he said, "because in Hindustani—I suppose you do not speak the language?—because in Hindustani the word *bosa* means 'kiss.' The man who named the

pearl evidently saw the gem as the very essence of beauty and loveliness. Very pretty imagery, don't you think ? ”

“ Very,” said Evelyn. She noticed that the sardonic gleam in the bulging eyes of the tall Hindu gave her the same chill of apprehension as the laugh of the Oriental who had brought her to the palace. The feeling of relief which Chitterji Rao's welcome entrance had given her was wearing off rapidly.

“ You will return again to Mr. Marvin's, of course—for the *nao-ratna* ? ”

“ He says he hasn't got it,” said Evelyn.

“ I am fairly certain he has,” said Chitterji Rao. “ I saw it pass into his possession last night. Will you go back to Marvin—for us ? His Highness will be generous if you return the *nao-ratna* to him. He offers a reward of ten thousand rupees. That is, in your money, roughly three thousand five hundred dollars.”

“ Why should I bring the pearl to you ? ” protested Evelyn. “ I own an interest in it.”

“ Ah ? ” Chitterji Rao spread his hands in a suave gesture of surprise. “ From whom did you acquire this interest ? ”

“ From Harrison Hoyt.”

“ I am very sorry,” the Household Officer purred, “ but Mr. Hoyt has never owned either the Bosa pearl—nor the diamond, the ruby, the sapphire, the emerald, the topaz, the jacinth, the cat's-eye nor the coral which make up the rest of the *nao-ratna*.”

“ You mean to say Harry Hoyt never had the pearl ? ”

“ He *had* it, yes. But he did not own it.”

“ He stole it, then ? ”

“ Not exactly. All I can say is that his possession of these jewels was highly irregular, just as Mr. Marvin's possession of them was highly irregular. They were,

and still are, the property of His Highness the Maharajah."

"Then why do you have to hire some one to steal them back? Why doesn't the Maharajah take up the matter through the courts?"

"Ah, the courts! The process of the law is long and tedious. His Highness must have the *nao-ratna* immediately."

"Why the rush?"

"The explanation is somewhat involved. Won't you sit down?"

The girl looked at Linnet.

"I've heard all this before," said Linnet, yawning.

"So I think I'll take off and grab some shut-eye. You'll excuse me, won't you, sister?"

"Gladly," said Evelyn. With the toe of one of her white kid pumps she separated a pillow from the multi-coloured pile and sank down upon it, her feet under her.

Linnet left.

"In the first place," Chitterji Rao began, "His Highness the Maharajah is not interested in the intrinsic value of the jewels. They are worth several *lakhs* of rupees, but this amount is trifling to the richest prince in Eastern India."

"Naturally!" Evelyn Branch was incredulous. She did not know what to believe any more. This was a page out of the Arabian Nights, and not something that was happening to a girl who had been making forty dollars a week only a short time ago.

"Were it not for the religious significance of the *nao-ratna* His Highness would not even bother with the matter," said Chitterji Rao with a superior smile. "But this particular nine-jewel talisman has been promised as a votive offering to the Temple of Kali before the Diwali festival to-morrow night. It is

imperative, therefore, that it be returned by that time, as the success of a man's projects for the entire year is determined at Diwali. Will you undertake to get it from Mr. Marvin—for ten thousand rupees?"

The girl uncurled her legs from the pillow. She arose, and held out her hand.

"I'll think about it," she said, "and let you know in the morning. Good-night."

"*Pakaro!*"

As Evelyn started for the door, the sharp command in Urdu rang out behind her. Two fiercely bearded soldiers of Jharnpur materialised suddenly before her. Then she found her way barred by gleaming bayonets which flung back in dazzling fragments the flashing reflections of the mirrored walls.

Her lips quivering with indignation, the girl rushed back to Chitterji Rao.

"Well?" Her eyes, dark with fear and resentment, made her one word ask a dozen angry questions.

Chitterji Rao's upper lip lifted a fraction of an inch in silent laughter.

"I forgot to tell you, Miss Branch," he said, "that attached to His Highness' offer is the provision that in case you refused, you must remain a—shall we say 'guest'? in the Palace until the *nao-ratna* is recovered,"

If the girl was dismayed by this announcement, she did not show it. She might not be able to control the situation but at least she had control of herself. Her smile matched the sarcasm of the Hindu's.

"You *are* absent-minded," she said. "However, I haven't refused—yet. I understand there is an old Oriental custom never to close any deal without bargaining."

Chitterji Rao's silent laughter became faintly and disagreeably audible.

"How much?" he asked.

The girl looked him squarely in the eyes. She was not afraid of them now. They were the eyes of a dead carp.

"Twenty thousand," she said, without blinking.

"Shall we split the difference?"

"Very well—fifteen, then." The girl stole a brief glance at the two native soldiers still making a steel barrier across the door. She was thinking fast. "And what about payment?"

"In currency—if you deliver the *nao-ratna* to me by to-morrow night."

"As a matter of good faith—and to cover certain incidental expenses—I should expect a certain advance." Evelyn held out her right hand, the better to display the significant gesture of thumb and forefinger. She was amazed at herself for incongruously remarking that she had neglected to renew her fingernail polish. She was amazed at herself, anyway—for her ability to simulate cool affrontery while, inside, her heart was being clutched and twisted by the icy grasp of dread.

"Certainly, certainly." With a smirk Chitterji Rao reached within his long black coat, withdrew a wad of currency and flicked off ten diploma-sized hundred rupee notes. As he extended the money toward Evelyn Branch his face underwent an abrupt transfiguration.

From somewhere in the night came the muted blare of a copper trumpet, three short blasts and a long one, like the agonized bellowing of some animal in pain.

Chitterji Rao stood with his lips parted, his patronising expression frozen into a meaningless grimace. The girl's newly-won composure slipped from her as she watched his sinister, bulging eyes.

"What—what's that?" she faltered.

"Nothing." Chitterji Rao's suave hands sketched an unconvincing pantomime of reassurance. "A religious ceremony. . . . The Brahmin priests of His Highness are preparing to greet the dawn."

"But it's still dark." Evelyn heard the mournful blare of the horn repeated. She heard many feet hurrying down distant stone corridors, the clink of metal, the staccato echo of Hindustani commands in an excited undertone. A green-coated A.D.C. burst into the room shouting:

"*Thanadar ata hai!*"

Without replying Chitterji Rao seized Evelyn's arm, pushed her past the bayonets of the guards into the blue gloom of the corridor where the man with the purple turban was waiting.

"Come, please."

Before she could catch her breath to protest the girl was being half dragged, half pushed up a dark, musty-smelling marble stairway, one landing after another, upward, always upward. . . .

A patch of star-pricked sky opened before her. Then the girl found herself being hurried along a parapet. She saw lights moving restlessly in a courtyard far below, smoky flares weaving, crossing, hurrying. . . . In an angle of the parapet she saw the figure of a man crouching, a man in occidental clothes, who was peering over the parapet into the street. From the back, she did not recognise the man, but she thought he seemed vaguely familiar. Clutching at a straw, she called, "Colonel Linnet!"

The European turned his head with an abrupt, startled movement. Darkness still veiled his features, but the new angle on his crouching figure showed her she had been mistaken. This man was not the square-shouldered, square-jawed Linnet. He was scrawny,

under-nourished looking. He glared at Evelyn in silent immobility.

"Come, please."

The man in the purple turban tugged at Evelyn's arm. She tried to hold back. She looked behind her. Over the parapet she caught a glimpse of a motor-car stopping in front of the Palace. Several men got out, crossed in front of the headlights. One of them was a bundle of dynamic energy in white trousers and alpaca coat, a man she had heard police officials address that afternoon as "Inspector Prike."

"Come, please."

Evelyn felt her arm wrenched painfully. She no longer resisted. In front of her a pointed dome raised its dark mass toward the stars like a huge inverted turnip. At the base of the dome was a bronze door. The man in the purple turban swung it open, dragged Evelyn into the gaping blackness.

CHAPTER XVI

"You should have stopped in front, where I left you, Robbins," said Inspector Prike to his deputy in the compound behind the *Anglo-Bengal Times* composing room. "Then perhaps we shouldn't have lost both of them."

"Both, inspector?"

"Mr. Marvin was calling on Rufus Dormer when I arrived."

"That red-head again?" The Deputy Inspector's waxed moustaches worked like the feelers of a nervous beetle. "And you thought he'd mind you like a good boy, and go home to sleep!"

"Doubtless he's a somnambulist, Robbins," said Prike. "At any rate, your abandoning your post has allowed him to make a leisurely exit by the front door."

"I'll get right after him, Inspector."

"I'd suggest you look for him in Alipore—or Guru's Lane."

"Why Guru's Lane, inspector?" Robbins asked.

"For the same reason, Robbins," said Prike, "that you or I, were we twenty years younger and knew that a fascinating and somewhat mysterious young woman with hair the colour of ripe jute was stopping at Mrs. Pereira's boarding house, might go to Guru's Lane."

"*Cherchez la femme*, eh, inspector? So you think that American girl is at the bottom of all this homicide?"

"I can't say—yet," Prike answered. "However, as far as I have been able to determine, Lee Marvin was not one of the late Mr. Hoyt's blackmail victims."

All his actions for the past thirty-six hours are apparently motivated by one of two things: An understandable interest in Miss Evelyn Branch, and a desire to increase his prestige with his firm by securing the Bosa pearl for Orfèvre, Ltd. I suggest you drop around at Guru's Lane, Robbins. I'm going to Alipore, myself."

"To the Maharajah of Jharnpur's palace?"

"Right."

"Still think the Maharajah's *nao-ratna* is a missing clue, inspector?"

"Practically certain of it. But I don't expect to find the *nao-ratna* at Alipore, Robbins. If one of the Maharajah's men had taken it from Marvin, I hardly think I would have found Chitterji Rao going through Hoyt's safe this afternoon. But I think, Robbins, that I might find Rufus Dormer at Alipore!"

"Dormer? How's that, inspector?"

"Rufus Dormer is after money," said Prike. "He told me this evening he needed cash. Since he's been associated with Hoyt, he would normally try to squeeze out a few rupees from the ex-victims of Hoyt's extortion industry. That would explain his return to the Grand Hotel this evening, to see Julius. Putting myself in his place, I go further down the list of Hoyt's clients, and come first to the name of the Maharajah of Jharnpur. I assume, for the moment, that Dormer has done the same. So I'm going to Alipore."

Inspector Prike had been to the Alipore Palace before, both socially and professionally. He knew the Maharajah of Jharnpur to be a very dark, very tall, very conceited Hindu who spoke English fluently, as a result of three years at Cambridge perfecting his cricket, voice modulation, tea-table etiquette and other branches of Western culture essential to an Oriental potentate. Prike also knew that His Highness was

wealthy enough to maintain, in addition to his Winter Palace in Alipore, three palaces in his own state of Jharnpur some miles up the Hooghly from Chander-nagore ; a Summer Palace in Darjeeling ; a string of racehorses ; one of the largest elephant stables outside of Hyderabad. But the Maharajah, Prike also surmised, would not be directly involved in the present case ; he was too smart for that. But Prike was equally sure that somewhere in the course of his investigation he would find prints of the long, intriguing fingers of Chitterji Rao.

The inspector was not greatly surprised, therefore, to be greeted at the entrance to the palace by the suave Household Officer himself, bubbling with amiability that was too enthusiastic to be sincere.

" You keep late hours in Alipore," said Prike, surveying the armed guards drawn up in close ranks behind the Household Officer. Prike always considered the Jharnpur state troops to be well trained—exceptionally good soldiers for natives of the Ganges delta—but he saw no personal menace in the present martial display. The Maharajah would not dare assail British authority outside the borders of his own state.

" We were expecting you, inspector."

" And arranged this military display to intimidate me ? "

" To honour you, inspector," purred Chitterji Rao.

If Inspector Prike found it odd that military courtesies should be accorded a police official on an unexpected visit in the middle of the night, his gravely enigmatic face gave no indication.

" As you probably know, Chitterji Rao, this is not a social call," he said. " I have come here to make an arrest."

A shadow crossed the face of Chitterji Rao so rapidly that it was almost immediately erased by a bland smile.

"I shall be glad to be of any assistance," he said.

"Thank you," said Prike. "You might save trouble for me and embarrassment for His Highness if you could arrange for the person I'm seeking to give himself up—outside the palace."

Chitterji Rao bowed. "If only I knew the name of the person——"

"I fancy you know it. The person came here within the hour—on a matter involving a sum of money."

Chitterji Rao stiffened. His heavy eyebrows arched almost imperceptibly. "I'm sure I know of no one——"

"Come, come," Prike interrupted. "You may not remember him because he tried to blackmail you out of only five hundred rupees."

"Him? Then it's a man?"

"Named Rufus Dormer."

Chitterji Rao relaxed. "I have not seen him," he said, "but if you would like to search the palace——"

"I was about to suggest that."

"With the exception, naturally, of His Highness' apartments."

"Naturally."

"Shall we start with the quarters of the A.D.C.'s?"

"If you like." Prike nodded affably but the tenseness about the muscles of his jaw denoted anything but passive acquiescence.

The investigation of Inspector Prike appeared on the surface to be no more than a leisurely stroll through the palace. The A.D.C. quarters, the rooms of the *munshis*, the servants' quarters, the separate kitchens for the various castes of Hindus, the military headquarters, the apartments of the court musicians

—all underwent an apparently casual inspection. In the guest wing the inspector's interest seemed to grow more alert. He paused in front of a locked door.

"I suppose this is Mr. Linnet's apartment?" he inquired.

"Colonel Linnet," the Household Officer corrected. "He is a guest of His Highness. I doubt the advisability of awakening him."

"A military man will understand the exigencies of duty," said Prike, beating a tattoo on the door-panel with his knuckles.

The door was opened almost immediately by George Linnet, fully dressed in khaki shorts and shirt. The inspector's quick glance in detailing his attire seemed to call for a reply, for he was immediately on the defensive.

"Hello," he said. "I heard the racket in the courtyard so I jumped into some clothes. What the hell's going on?"

"Colonel Linnet," interposed Chitterji Rao suavely, "this is Inspector Prike."

"I believe we have met," said Prike quickly. "We were both wedding guests—of a sort."

Linnet burst into a hearty guffaw. "Say, that's right," he laughed. "You're the bird that kept me waiting at the church this morning—or would you call it yesterday morning?"

"I was rather busy trying to reconcile the nuptial with the funeral," said Prike, "so that I didn't have a chance to talk to you at length, Colonel—or is it Lieutenant?"

Linnet laughed again, but less heartily. He made a careless gesture with the grey glove that covered his rigid-fingered left hand. "Well, they call me colonel," he replied. "And I am, too. A triple threat man, I guess, if you want to count the Kentucky commission, which I don't. I was a colonel down in Nicaragua in

the old Sandino days until the Marines made me quit ; I wouldn't shoot one of my own buddies, after all. Then I was a Bolivian colonel in the Gran Chaco fuss. I've just came from there."

"You like fighting, don't you, lieutenant?—or rather colonel." Prike seemed genuinely embarrassed at having confused the titles.

"A damn sight better than eating," Linnet exclaimed.

"Even fighting with your superiors?"

Linnet laughed again, with even less enthusiasm. "I see you heard about that little trouble I had back in the States after the war," he said. "It's a long story but it really wasn't my fault. You see this cocky medico major used to——"

"I am very much more interested," Prike broke in, "in knowing what your exact relations were with Harrison Hoyt. You were a bit vague this morning—not unnaturally so in view of the shock of seeing an old friend tumble out of a *ghari* dead."

"Hell, he wasn't an old friend," said Linnet. "I hadn't seen him for three or four years. I met him in a New York speak. He was handing out the manure for some Broadway leg show and I was resting up from from Nicaragua. Some spig clipped me in the *bosque* down there and the slug of lead never did work out. It used to hurt like hell on rainy days, so I'd been hitting the bottle a little. Hoyt and I used to raise elbows together, that's all."

The gun-metal eyes of Inspector Prike showed not the slightest flicker of amusement at Linnet's breezy chatter.

"You came to India to—raise elbows with Mr Hoyt?"

"To raise hell more likely," Linnet answered. "You see, when this Gran Chaco war petered out on

me, I was sort of loose ends for excitement. This fuss down in Ethiopia looked too one-sided to be much fun for Linnet. Then I got a post-card from Hoyt with a picture of the Taj-Mahal at moonlight and I got the idea I'd like to do a little big-game hunting so I wrote to Hoyt, and he wrote back that he's got a friend who's a Maharajah with a private jungle full of tigers just crying to be shot ; and to come on out. So here I am."

"Your interest in tigers must have given you much in common with Kurt Julius."

"Julius?" Linnet frowned. "Oh, sure. That's the fat elephant broker. Yes, I met him at Hoyt's dinner. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but a hell of a liar. I caught him in a couple of big ones."

"You haven't seen Julius since the dinner?" Prike demanded.

"Sure," Linnet admitted. "I ran into him early this evening in the Grand Hotel bar. We lifted a couple of quick ones together."

"And discussed the death of Harrison Hoyt?"

"Sure. Who doesn't? That's the big topic of all the gin mill debating societies. The boys seem to think there was some scullduggery about Hoyt's kicking off. What do you think, inspector?"

Prike ignored the question. He was casually strolling about the room, seemingly preoccupied. "Did Julius show you his tigers in Dumdum Road?" he asked.

"Dumdum Road?" Linnet chuckled. "Say, that's a hot one. Any relation to dumdum bullets? We used them down in Nicaragua. Nasty soft-nosed babies. Tear a man's guts out."

"Kurt Julius had a transient menagerie in Dumdum Road," said Prike.

"Had?" The past tense seemed to surprise Chitterji Rao.

"Had," Prike repeated. He came up to the two

men and stopped. "Julius was found dead there to-night."

The inspector's features remained expressionless as he made this announcement, but his glance shifted quickly from Linnet to Chitterji Rao and back to Linnet. He was looking for reaction—and he got them.

"Dead?" exclaimed Chitterji Rao.

Linnet's angular jaw dropped.

"The Hell you say!"

The faces of both the Hindu and the American registered heavily. But the emotion defied the efforts of Prike's nimble mind to classify them. Both men obviously sought to give the impression of amazement and both were obviously acting. Neither, Prike was convinced, was in the least surprised. What did they feel? Relief? Triumph? Annoyance? Malicious amusement?

"What caused the poor chap's death?" asked Chitterji Rao, with great concern.

"For the moment, gentlemen," said Prike, "I am afraid you can answer that question as well as I can." He paused, glancing from one face to the other. "Perhaps better. Good-night, lieutenant—pardon me—Colonel Linnet. Shall we go on, Chitterji Rao?"

Linnet's door closed but the catch did not click. Prike knew instinctively that Linnet was still standing with his hand on the knob, listening.

"I hardly suppose you want to visit the *zenana*, inspector," purred Chitterji Rao as they started down the gloomily-lit corridor. "Or is this chap Dormer a lady's man?"

"Let's not beat about the bush," Prike countered. "Dormer is carrying on Hoyt's business on a small scale. He has come to ask for money in return for not divulging certain information—information, I fancy, concerning the loss of the Maharajah's *nao-ratna*."

"But there is nothing to divulge, inspector——"

"You've been negotiating with Hoyt to get the *nao-ratna* back from some one. Who is it? A woman?"

"Really, inspector, His Highness has been too much engrossed in affairs of state to dream of love these days——"

"Nonsense," snapped Inspector Prike. "You forgot that my previous visits to the palace have given me a rather clear insight into the economic phases of the Maharajah's emotional life. There was the matter of the plump Viennese tight-rope walker and the emerald bracelet. Remember? Then there was the Viceregal inquiry into the disappearance of that Nautch girl from the *zenana* of the Rajah of Tuak. . . . Naturally, my dear Chitterji Rao, when the Maharajah's Household Officer employs a man like Harrison Hoyt to recover missing jewellery, I must presume that His Highness has had another unfortunate experience with the shrewder sex—which he prefers to liquidate without publicity. Otherwise, why didn't you come to us?"

"His Highness has lost nothing, inspector."

"What, then, were you doing at Hoyt's safe?"

"Ah, that. The trinket in question has been located. I appreciate your concern, but must ask you not to trouble further about that matter."

"Would you put that in writing—so that I can't be accused of dereliction of duty? Will you write a chit saying that the *nao-ratna*, which I believe contains the Bosa pearl, has been recovered."

"Gladly. Won't you come this way, inspector?"

Inspector Prike preceded Chitterji Rao into a long corridor lit with flickering oil lights in blue glass bowls. His manner, still leisurely despite the constant activity of his alert eyes, suddenly changed when he had gone a dozen feet. The casual little man became

in an instant a tense, compelling personification of efficient energy. Opposite the narrow, marble stairway that wound upward from an alcove in the corridor, he stopped abruptly. On the first marble step was a dark, purplish stain no larger than an eight-anna piece. With one precise movement he stopped, whipped out his flashlight, touched the dark spot with his forefinger. It was liquid, as viscous as coagulating blood. Immediately the Inspector was bolt upright.

"Shall we climb the stairs, Chitterji Rao?" The metallic ring of his voice made the words a command rather than a question.

"Most certainly, inspector."

The inspector's flashlight sent an expanding yellow disc rippling up the marble stairs ahead of him. The glow illuminated the garish colours of mural figures painted in the Persian style, but Prike ignored them. His eyes were seeking more stains on the white marble. He found one on the second landing, two more at the head of the staircase. The inspector's forefinger touched each spot. He seemed particularly interested in the last two. Although side by side, one was almost dry, the other still liquid.

"Blood, inspector?" Chitterji Rao asked in bored tones as he looked down superciliously at the stooping detective.

"Your perspicacity is amazing, Chitterji Rao."

"I'm afraid the explanation will disappoint you. The Risalder of the guard had a nose-bleed just before you arrived."

Inspector Prike did not comment. He emerged from the stairway to the roof of the palace. He had some difficulty in picking up the trail of blood again, for the roof was still wet from the recent rain. At the end of five minutes he discovered one blurred stain,

then another. In an angle of the parapet he found a sticky little puddle as though the person who was bleeding had remained for some time in one place. Again the red trail led off across the roof towards a pointed dome which raised its dark mass towards the stars like an immense inverted turnip. The inspector's flashlight explored the curved surfaces of the dome, traced a lotus petal motif carved into the stone base, paused upon a bronze door set into the centre of one of the great stone petals.

"What's in here, Chitterji Rao?"

"Nothing. The architect intended these domes for lumber rooms. They have never been used."

The flashlight roved over the green patina of the bronze door, pausing upon a heavy ring at one edge. There was blood on the ring.

"Open this," said Prike.

"I will have to see if the keys can be found. They are never used——"

Inspector Prike grasped the bronze ring, twisted it, pulled. The door creaked open.

There was a rush of air and a flurry of something dark catapulting past Prike's head.

Prike's gun was automatically in his hand. The flashlight beam with the muzzle picked up the panicky, swooping flight of a squeaking bat.

The beam swept back into the vaulted interior of the dome, darted over the mildewed walls and the floor. Prike started across the threshold, stumbled against something yeilding, caught himself. He focused his flashlight downward, dropped quickly to his knees.

An exclamation of genuine surprise escaped Chitterji Rao.

Inspector Prike was kneeling on the stone floor beside the prone figure of a Hindu whose purple

turban, half unwrapped from his head, was knotted tightly about his throat.

Prike loosened the garroting strip of muslin. His fingers sought the man's pulse. The Hindu was alive.

As he released the unconscious man's wrist Prike noticed that the tightly clenched fingers clung to a long tuft of silken, wheat-coloured hair.

CHAPTER XVII

EVELYN BRANCH was not by nature a face-slapper. Neither was she a hair-puller or a blue-murder-screamer. She did not become vocal at the sight of a mouse, and, growing to maturity in the last years of Prohibition, she had always managed a defence against the ardours of the most enthusiastic hip-flask swain—without violence. But as she was being rushed over the roof of the Alipore Palace, she felt that her situation was getting too physical for mere talk. Even if the dawn did come up like thunder in this part of the world, she saw no reason for this lightning speed.

“What—what’s the hurry?” she gasped, as the stars before her were blotted out by the dark mass of the pointed dome.

The only reply of the man in the purple turban was a chilling low-pitched laugh. His laugh, his grip on her arm, the ominous bellowing of trumpets, the clank of arms and the mysterious, torch-lit confusion below, set the girl’s imagination aflame with all the stories she had ever read of Oriental cruelty: The massacres of the Sepoy Rebellion, the butchery of the Europeans at Delhi, the slaughter of women and children by Nana Sahib at Cawnpore. . . . By the time the key grated in the lock and the heavy bronze door swung open, Evelyn had had enough. She reverted, for the moment, to the primitive.

She set her heels, pulled back, screamed. The inexorable arm of the man with the purple turban dragged her through the door. She fought. Her hands beat vainly though quick, desperate arcs. Her elbows struck the door frame. Her heels screeched on the stone floor. She kicked. . . .

Then her fingers caught in the soft twist of a turban. She tugged, felt the folds come loose into her hands. She doubled a length of the cloth, looped it out frantically in front of her, drew it taut. A choking gasp answered. Long fingers touched her face, wormed into her hair, entwined themselves, jerked savagely. She winced with pain, but she didn't scream this time. She had a job to do now. She twisted the loop tighter. . . .

Suddenly a grey shadow fluttered in the darkness beside Evelyn, hurtling toward her through the half-opened door. There was a thwack of flesh on flesh, a grunt. Evelyn gave a little cry as she felt hair uprooted. Then she was free.

In a daze she saw the Hindu crumple to the floor. She saw a small, scrawny finger in white pounce upon him, knot a fold of the turban about his throat. Then the scrawny figure straightened up, pushed her roughly before him, clanged the door shut upon the prostrate Hindu. As he faced her and she made out his drawn, weazened features by the dim starlight, she recognised her unkempt rescuer as a European. His rumpled white drills were covered with dark stains, apparently blood from cuts on his face which had been freshly reopened by his recent exertion. He was hardly the answer to a maiden's prayer, but she was certainly glad to see him.

"Thank you," breathed Evelyn.

"Thank me?" The scrawny European snorted derisively. "You're nothing to thank me for."

"The Green Knight turns out to be purple, but you've done very well as Sir Gawain——"

"Rot! You were better off as you were. Don't think the age of chivalry is reborn. I'm not helping you. I'm helping myself. I need you. Come along now."

The frowsy man with the gashed face shoved the girl unceremoniously before him. Evelyn glanced back at him. He was not a very reassuring sight. At home she would have shrunk from him, but here he was Occidental, some one she could at least understand.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said.

"You should be."

"But you're one of my own race."

Again the European snorted. "All the more reason for you to beware," he sneered. "A Hindu is forbidden by his religion to take the life of any living thing, even a louse. The great civilisers of the West spread their culture by killing. First they kill men's souls——"

"You're being terribly clever."

"I'm being frank. Apparently you haven't been in Calcutta long enough to know of Rufus Dormer, the outcast, the renegade white man, the miserable Englishman who is so low that he borrows money from Indians, the deplorable journalist who hasn't even a bearer to bring his tiffin and who keeps from starving only because his office serves tea and biscuits without charge every day at three. Look at me!"

Dormer leaned so close to the girl that his face almost brushed hers. Instantly she recoiled. Contact with the man, the mere touch of his fusty clothes was repulsive. The ferret eyes leering at her from beneath a shaggy mop of uncombed hair, the contemptuous twist of his lips were more potent arguments than Dormer's own words.

"All right. I'll despise you, if that makes you any happier," she said. "Now can you get me out of this place?"

Dormer clamped his bony fingers on the girl's elbow.

"That's exactly what I intend to do," he said.

"But how are you going to get out?"

"The same way I came in."

Dormer dabbed his bleeding face with his grimy sleeve. He hurried the girl back down the narrow marble stairs, through the indigo gloom of the long corridor. He seemed perfectly familiar with the palace as he made devious turnings, paused at the entrance to a courtyard when he saw a squad of Jharnpur soldiers, doubled back, darted into a short, black passageway. A breath of hot, foul air made Evelyn gasp. Then she found herself in a large room which was obviously the quarters of pariah menials.

Several dozen sweepers and other low-caste servants, emaciated black men and wrinkled women, lay sleeping on the stone floor like heaps of dirty rags. One white-haired, toothless old man, his naked torso glistening like mahogany in the wavering saffron light of a single wick floating in a bowl of cocoanut oil, slept with his head pillowed on the dirty, grey flanks of a hump-backed bullock. Brass pots and earthenware *chatis*, half-buried among the silent forms of the sleepers, indicated that the same room served for eating and sleeping. The air fairly quivered with the stench of rancid *ghi*, sweat, and bullock dung.

Dormer murmured something in Hindustani. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper yet half a dozen heads raised instantly. Dormer continued speaking. More heads were raised. Wan smiles appeared on brown faces. The old man with the white hair arose and came forward. Dormer took a handful of crumpled and broken cigarettes from his pocket and gave them to him. Mumbling contentedly, the old man crossed the room. Dormer and the girl, stepping gingerly over the sleeping menials, followed. The old man took a key from his soiled *dhoti* and opened a door. A second later Dormer and Evelyn Branch stood outside the rear of the palace.

"In India," Dormer muttered, "bribery may be accomplished with kindness. In our superior Western civilisation bribery is sordid and mercenary. You're about to see just how sordid an Occidental can be. Come."

So grateful was Evelyn to fill her lungs again with air that had no taste that she did not protest when Dormer urged her hastily along a narrow street, through a grove of wind-stirred palms, past a tank which rocked restless stars on its dark bosom. They turned a corner where a closed third-class *ghari* was waiting. The girl opened the door, turned, and extended her hand.

"Thanks again, Mr. Dormer," she said. "You've been very kind—and not at all sordid, really."

"Just a moment. I'm going along."

"There's no need——"

"Oh, yes, there is! I was outside the room when Chitterji Rao counted out ten hundred-rupee notes for you. I want half."

"You left your key-hole a moment too soon," said Evelyn, "or you'd know that I didn't get the money. Chitterji Rao put it back in his wallet when that ungodly horn-blowing started, and I was whisked away by the Purple Knight——"

"We'll see about that," said Dormer. "You've got money coming to you, anyway. I heard you bargain with Chitterji Rao for fifteen thousand dibs. Get in."

"Are you seeing me home, then?"

"I am not. Get in."

"To Mr. Marvin's, then?"

"No. Get in."

The girl hesitated, then obeyed. As the door closed, the distant baying of jackals quavered through the night from the direction of Baligunj. The *ghari* started. Evelyn shuddered.

Dormer sensed her movement in the darkness of the *ghari*. He said, "I'm glad you're revising your attitude toward me. I much prefer revulsion to mistaken gratitude. It is a more appropriate prelude to what you are about to experience."

There was a moment of silence. The girl did not dare ask further details of her destination. She preferred not to suffer in anticipation; yet she felt she had to talk.

"You seem to go in and out of the Maharajah's palace without much difficulty," she said lightly. "I suppose you're an intimate of His Highness."

Dormer laughed bitterly. "I go to the palace at least once each cold weather," he said, "in a purely professional capacity. His Highness usually manages to make unpleasant news once a year. But my friendship at the palace is restricted to those unfortunate and unwashed menials we have just left. I find them fundamentally much more pleasant people than their betters. Perhaps we feel a certain kinship in our paralleled positions in society. Perhaps they are amazed that my membership in the ruling race does not compel me to kick them or call them *suwar-ka-bachcha*. Perhaps they are beaten dogs wagging their tails in gratitude at being thrown a scrap of kindness. Whatever the motive, they are always ready to do me a favour, as you have just seen."

"And what is your motive for taking me with you?"

"Sordid, as I told you. Money."

The girl laughed with genuine amusement in spite of her uneasiness. "I hope you're not thinking of holding me for ransom," she said. "I'm flat broke, myself, and there's no one in the world who would pay a thin dime to get me back."

"The problem of turning a dishonest penny from

your peculiar situation," said Dormer, "is exclusively mine."

"But you must know some one more solvent who could help you, if you're in financial difficulties."

"No one in Calcutta would help Rufus Dormer to the extent of a single square two-anna bit. And I happen to be in urgent need of a sum that amounts to nearly three months of my magnificent salary."

"Was that what you were after at the palace?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you get the money—or were they watching things too closely?" The girl's tone was matching the sarcasm of Dormer's.

"I'm not a thief. Robbery is beneath my talents. I simply had to leave the palace before the conclusion of my mission, because of—an unexpected visitor."

"Inspector Prike?"

On an impulse, the girl flung out the name of the detective she had seen arrive at Alipore. By the startled movement in the dark beside her, she knew that she had made a bull's-eye. When Dormer said nothing, she had a momentary feeling of superiority which she could not resist following up.

"Why were you avoiding Inspector Prike? Are you a fugitive from justice?" she asked.

"There is no justice in India," Dormer replied, "and I am not a fugitive."

"Then why did you run away?"

"I have my own reasons for not wishing to see Inspector Prike."

"Are you——?" Evelyn stopped short. She sat up very straight, frightened by her own thought. She raised her fingertips to her cheek; they were icy. "Did you kill Harrison Hoyt?" she resumed in a strained voice.

Dormer chuckled grimly. The *ghari*, rumbling and

lurching along Chowringhee, jogged past a street lamp. The yellow glow struck through the closed shutters of the box-like vehicle and crawled across Dormer's face like phantom prison bars. For a brief instant Evelyn saw the thin black moustache lift in a crooked, cynical grin. She thought she could read guilt in his glittering eyes.

Abruptly she sprang from her seat. She was certain she was riding with a murderer. Her hand stabbed for the door handle.

Dormer reached out, hurled the girl away from the door. She fell against the back of the seat, breathless and trembling. Dormer grabbed her arm, twisted it. The *ghari* rattled on.

"So you think I killed Hoyt?"

"You act like it."

"Our Hindu friends would say that Hoyt was killed by his own Karma. No one is to blame, but his own rotten acts."

"Then it's Harrison Hoyt's Karma that you're running away from?"

"Mind your own business!"

"I am. You seem to have made yourself very much my business——"

"Shut up!" Dormer gave the girl's arm a savage twist. Evelyn gasped with pain. "Shut up! You'll speak when I speak to you. Otherwise——"

Dormer paused on a note of menace, then chuckled sadistically as he felt the girl's arm tremble in his grasp. He released his pressure a little.

The sky was beginning to pale in the East as the *ghari* rolled northward.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE mauve mists of dawn quivered into shreds before the withering breath of the new day. An army of *mehtas* plied their brooms to clear the pavements of the dead green flies piled ankle deep about the street-light standards. Haggling Hindu cooks swarmed through the bazaars in noisy quest of fresh spices for the *burra sahib's* curry. The Maidan was waking to hoof-beats as *chota sahibs* in khaki shorts rode out for their before-breakfast canter. From Chitpur bridge to Tolly's Nallah, all Calcutta was drinking early-morning tea. And in the tea of Inspector Prike there was a liberal infusion of very old brandy.

The fact that Inspector Prike had uncorked his precious 1900 Armagnac so early in the morning indicated that he had reached a dead end in his investigation. Not that he was baffled. He was satisfied that the principal elements of his case were already at hand. All he needed was proper co-ordination of his facts, reinterpretation of some clue he had read incorrectly, possibly the discovery of some key piece that would allow him to fit the puzzle together. To this end he had always found brandy an excellent stimulus of the sub-conscious—particularly when he had had only three hours sleep. Many a criminal in the past had reason to regard the appearance on the breakfast-table of the 1900 Armagnac—which Prike himself imported directly from Les Landes—as an evil omen.

The inspector's chief problem this morning, as he sat sipping tea and brandy, clad only in his crimson *dhoti*, was to find a place in the puzzle for the Hindu in the purple turban he had found unconscious in Alipore. The Hindu, a minor official of the Maharajah

of Jharnpur's household, had been quickly revived by Inspector Prike. He seemed strangely unable to account for his predicament atop the palace. He did not remember being attacked and had no idea who had strangled him or carried him inside the dome. Neither could he explain how he came to be clutching a handful of blonde hair—although Prike knew the answer to this one, in spite of the Hindu's convenient lapse of memory.

Two other new pieces for the puzzle consisted of cablegrams which had been delivered that morning—one from Nouméa, which concerned Jacques Vrai; the second from Singapore, which seemed to concern Henry Kobayashi. As Inspector Prike mulled over the significance of the latest developments, he bathed and dressed as though he had all the time in the world. He sat down to a leisurely breakfast—beefsteak and kidney pie, since the cold weather had practically started—and was well into his third cup of tea and brandy when Deputy Inspector Robbins arrived with still another piece to be fitted into the puzzle.

"I just got a report from Jenkins on those Jumbo fountain-pens," Robbins announced. "Seems like there's twenty-nine shops in Calcutta proper that sells that model, and six in Howrah. Five shops have sold one pen each this week, and one stall in the Municipal Bazaar sold three late Thursday afternoon."

"Three?" Inspector Prike was instantly all attention. "To the same person?"

"That's what the bazaar *walla* says. He's a Mohammedan by the name of Sustî. He says the same man bought all three pens."

"Unusual, isn't it, Robbins?" Prike drummed with his fingers on the table-cloth. Would the three fountain-pens fit into his pattern of intrigue and sudden death, or would they have to be discarded?
"What sort of man bought them, Robbins?"

"The bazaar *walla* couldn't say. He didn't seem extra bright. But he says he thinks he'd recognise the man if he saw him again."

"Good. Then tell Jenkins to bring Mr. Sustis here to my rooms to-night . . . say, at about eleven o'clock."

"All right, inspector."

"By the way, Robbins. Did you locate Dormer?"

"Well, no, inspector." Robbins was crestfallen. He had expected to be able to reproach Prike over not finding Dormer at Alipore, but his usual song about the superiority of solid, practical methods over theory was thrown somewhat off key by the fact that Robbins himself had let Dormer slip through his fingers. "You see, I'd located Dormer's address yesterday afternoon," he explained, "but by dinner-time he'd cleared out. Moved without leaving forwarding instructions—which is a sure sign he's guilty, as sure as there's sixteen annas in a rupee. Why would an innocent man go changing his domicile sudden-like, just after a murder's been committed?"

"They can't all be guilty, Robbins," said Prike. "Last night you were ready to hang Lee Marvin. . . . What do you suppose Evelyn Branch was doing at the Alipore Palace, Robbins?"

"You sure she was there, inspector?"

"There was no name engraved on that strand of blonde hair I found, Robbins, but in view of the fact that Mrs. Pereira's *durwan* reports her departure shortly after one o'clock this morning, I think it safe to assume that the hair belongs to Miss Branch. Has she returned to Guru's Lane?"

"Not up to an hour ago. Maybe she's sweet on this Colonel Linnet."

"I'd rather think, from the uprooted hair, that she was detained against her will. I wonder if Dormer——?"

"You think Dormer carried her off?"

"Somebody was bleeding profusely on that marble stairway to the roof, and since Dormer was cut by his fall through the skylight, he could easily have been the one. By the way, Robbins, did you question Dormer on the subject of Hoyt's bachelor dinner?"

"I did."

"Did he tell you anything about Hoyt, shortly before he disappeared, being called away by some one who waited at the head of the stairs in Peliti's Restaurant?"

"He did. And it seems that when Hoyt came back he acted quite upset. He gave some sort of package to Marvin."

"Could Dormer identify the man at the head of the stairs?"

"He says he couldn't see very well, but the man looked like Jacques Vrai. Marvin thinks it was Vrai, too."

"Good," Prike said. "Because in ten minutes I'm running up to Chandernagore to talk to Monsieur Vrai in the light of a cable I just received from the prefect of police at Nouméa, New Caledonia. To the extent of four closely-packed telegraph forms, the prefect is highly honoured to be of service, and furnishes lengthy details on the rather surprising career of one Jean George Jules Honoré Marie Vorais, who undoubtedly, under the alias of Jacques Vrai, is the man to whom I refer. I am advised that Vorais, *dit* Vrai, is wanted in New Caledonia, and if he is at present in Calcutta, he is to be detained until extradition can be arranged."

"Shall I go with you to Chandernagore, inspector?"

"No," said Prike, "because I have another cablegram here, from the Straits police. It seems that the cargo of machine guns and ammunition which was seized in Singapore Wednesday on a Japanese freighter, was destined for Calcutta. Moreover, they were

consigned to Harrison J. Hoyt. Inasmuch as the arms were packed in cases labelled 'cotton goods,' I think you might drop around and pick up Henry Kobayashi. It might serve a double purpose if you brought him to Chandernagore. Meet me at the Hotel Dupleix. I'll question him there."

"All right, inspector."

"And another thing, Robbins. On your way, I wish you'd stop at the Municipal Bazaar and buy me three of those Jumbo fountain-pens."

CHAPTER XIX

As Dormer's *ghari* rumbled into the dawn, north of Harrison Road, Evelyn Branch found it difficult to keep from nodding. Dormer had said nothing for twenty minutes, and the girl's fear and excitement were gradually giving way to fatigue. When the vehicle left the broad avenues which, for military reasons, allow the south-western quarters of Calcutta breathing space, she forced herself to open her eyes. Through the latticed doors of the carriage she saw that she was moving through the narrow, tortuous lanes of the purely native parts of town. She could make out the dim façades of tightly-shuttered houses, three-storied homes of *purdah* families, intricately-carved wooden arches, shopfronts with overhanging second-stories, stone scrolls, stucco ornaments in high relief. Then lopsided mud huts slipped by, whole lines of them, with crooked, bulging tile roofs that seemed to be dripping off the eaves like molasses; and narrow pavements littered with trash and spattered with the crimson juice of areca nut; half-naked, homeless men, sleeping against leaning walls. . . .

After what seemed an interminable ride, the *ghari* stopped.

"Get out!" Dormer ordered.

The girl squared her shoulders. If this man were a murderer. . . .

"Get out!" Dormer repeated.

"Listen, Mr. Dormer," Evelyn began. She sparred for time. If this man were a murderer, there was nothing she could do about it, here, alone with him. She had a plan. . . . "You say you need money. If

you heard my bargain with Chitterji Rao, why don't you come in on the deal with me. I'll split with you."

"I know you will," said Dormer. "That's exactly what we're going to do."

"Then why don't you take me to Lee Marvin?"

"He hasn't the Maharajah's *nao-ratna*," said Dormer.

"But he has. I'm sure he has. Even Chitterji Rao said Lee Marvin had the Bosa pearl."

"Rot. Marvin came to see me only a few hours ago. He asked a dozen questions about the jewels. If he had them, why did he come to me?"

"I don't know. Where are they, then?"

"For that information," said Dormer, "you're going to pay—and well."

"You're boasting," said Evelyn. "You don't know where the *nao-ratna* is. If you knew as much as you want me to believe, you'd take the whole reward for yourself. Why are you offering to share with me?"

"Because I . . . prefer to remain in the background," said Dormer with his stock sneer. "Prike is a hard man to fool."

"And how am I supposed to fool him?"

"You won't. All you can hope for is to twine your pretty fingers around the Maharajah's beads before Prike gets around to it. After all, the inspector is busy these days."

"And where are these . . . beads?"

"Right back where they were before Hoyt got his hands on them. At Chandernagore."

"Chandernagore?"

"Yes. And in getting them you'll probably meet a charming lady who should be of great interest to you—a Mademoiselle Antoinette Vrai."

Evelyn's eyes widened. "You mean Harry Hoyt's—! No! No, I don't want to meet her!"

"You'll have an hour or two to get used to the idea,"

said Dormer. "I want to make a few arrangements before we start. Get out, now!"

Evelyn got out of the *ghari* with alacrity. She was piloted down a narrow, odorous alley, at the end of which was a wooden door in a mud wall. Without another word Dormer opened the door, pushed her through, slammed it. She heard the key turning in the lock outside before she began to kick and pummel the wooden panels.

"Mr. Dormer! You don't have to lock me in. Wait, Mr. Dormer. . . ."

She pounded and shouted for five minutes; then she began to laugh at herself. She certainly had a genius for picking the wrong people, for getting herself into one mess after another. . . .

She took a cigarette lighter from her bag, snapped a flame from it, looked about her new prison. She was in a small room, not larger than ten by ten, with a single small window, high in one wall. The walls and floor were brushed with mud. The furniture consisted of a chipped enamel bowl and pitcher and some shaving things on a wooden box, a kerosene lamp on the floor, and a cot, consisting of leather strips stretched across a wooden frame, in one corner. There was a battered pasteboard suitcase under the cot. Evelyn tried to open it, but found it locked. She sat down wearily on the edge of the cot, closed her eyes. Before she found the strength to open them again, she had fallen asleep. . . .

She was awakened by the hot, moist impact of a shaft of sunshine streaming in through the little window. She was surprised to find she had slept sitting on the crude cot, leaning against the wall. Her bewilderment on awakening changed swiftly to dread when she realised where she was. She sprang up—and grimaced at the pain and stiffness of her joints. She tried the door; it was still locked. She discovered that by standing on tiptoe she could see out the window.

The window looked out upon a compound, swarming with men. Brilliant, multi-coloured turbans moved in a shifting mosaic of red and green and saffron. Boards wagged as brown hands gesticulated. The morning hummed with the confused din of a dozen dialects and the clink of money—copper pice, nickel annas, silver rupees. At first Evelyn thought she was looking at some sort of bazaar. Gradually it dawned upon her that she was in a gambling establishment. Corpulent Bengalis, crowded about six lumps of sugar, were betting upon which lump a fly would first settle. A group of squat, smug Marwaris, their tightly-wound pugarees bobbing like so many flat, thick-brimmed derbies in pastel shades of pink, blue and yellow, were gathered around a tin spout that terminated a peculiar section of slanting roof and gutters made of hammered-out petrol tins. The Marwaris looked anxiously at the sky, watching for scurrying scraps of clouds, while a tall, one-eyed Kashmiri droned a continuous and unintelligible announcement. In the background stood two olive-skinned Afghan money-lenders—huge scowling, bobbed-haired men with sleeveless jackets of black velvet and long clubs with which to collect their exorbitant interest.

Evelyn watched for several minutes, fascinated by the colour and movement, before she realised that here was a contact with the outside world. She had only to shout for the police, and she would no longer be a prisoner. She drew a deep breath—but she did not shout.

After all, what had she to gain by shouting? Her freedom, of course. But didn't she have more to gain by playing along with Dormer a while longer? What if he were a murderer? She wasn't afraid of him now that the sun was shining and she could hear other voices. There was no denying the fact that she still had her heart set on digging up the Bosa pearl—of which

Dormer apparently knew a great deal and he wouldn't harm her as long as she continued to be useful to him.

Furthermore, if he were a murderer, she would have a better chance of bringing him to justice if she remained with him, than if she put him on his guard by running off.

Evelyn moved away from the window and sat down on the crude bed. She opened her bag, cut the back off an old envelope with a nail file, hurriedly wrote a message. From a tiny vial of nail-polish she poured a thread of coral liquid around the inside edge and folded the paper. The nail-polish should seal it effectively ; that was the way she stopped the runs in silk stockings. Then she wrote an address on the outside of the paper, took out a silver rupee, closed her bag, and returned to the window. Brandishing the money in one hand and the note in the other, she shouted :

" Will some one please come here ? "

The Marwaris standing around the tin spout turned and looked at her in open-mouthed wonder. Evelyn called again. A grey-haired Oriental in a gold-embroidered pill-box cap of red velvet detached himself from the group. As he approached, Evelyn saw that he was cross-eyed.

" Hello," he said, with one eye on the girl's face and the other on the silver rupee. " I am speaking English. Good-morning. Are you wishing to place wager ? What game, please ? Rain game is offering attractive odds now." He glanced at the sky. " Offering twenty to one for rain in ten minutes, ten to one for rain in twenty minutes, five to one for rain in half an hour, four to one for——"

" I don't want to bet," interrupted Evelyn. " I'm just looking for some one to carry a message for me. Can you read ? "

" Message ? " echoed the cross-eyed Oriental. " Ah,

yes, chit." He took the rupee and the folded paper. "Yes, can read English. 'Mister . . . Lee : . . Marvin . . . 19½ Theatre . . . Road. . . .' Yes. All right. *Chokra, idhar ao.*"

He called a half-naked boy from the fly-and-sugar game, gave him the note and explained the address. Then he deposited Evelyn's silver rupee in a leather bag from which he took out a four-anna coin to give the boy.

Evelyn was anxiously following the boy's progress through the crowd when she heard the door open and close behind her. She turned abruptly from the window. Rufus Dormer came in with a brass pot full of buffalo milk.

"Here's your breakfast," he said.

Evelyn tasted the milk. It had a peculiar, sweet, rich flavour. She put it down after the first swallow.

"Afraid of being poisoned?" Dormer asked with mock politeness.

"Not hungry." She wondered if he had seen her pass the note out the window.

Dormer picked up the brass pot, tilted it to his lips, and drained it.

"Now give me your passport," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

"What do you want with my——?"

"Give it to me!" Dormer repeated. There was menace in his voice.

Evelyn opened her bag, handed Dormer the little red-backed document that proclaimed her an American citizen. Dormer took it, dragged the battered paste-board suitcase from under the cot, unlocked it, tossed the passport in, locked it again.

"That's just to make sure you won't run away from me before we get back," he said.

"Where are we going?"

"To Chandernagore," Dormer announced.

CHAPTER XX

DILAPIDATED venetian blinds suspended at seasick angles across the veranda of the Hotel Dupleix in Chandernagore made dingy gaps in the blinding white walls of the sprawling one-story building. In the steaming shadow of the verandah, high, fan-backed Bilibid chairs held out empty arms from which the rattan was unravelling. Just beyond, above the reception desk in the shabby lobby, faded French and English flags were crossed above fly-specked portraits of Clive and General Dupleix. On the walls were mildewed steel engravings of Foch, Joffre and Bonaparte flanked by gaudy posters beseeching the trio of generals to go home via the *paquebots rapides et luxueux des Messageries Maritimes* and to spend the summer at Grenoble via the P.L.M.

When Inspector Prike entered the Hotel Dupleix, the lobby was deserted, except for the fourth assistant administrateur and the sub-secretary to the municipal council, who were seated in red plush chairs at a marble-top table, sipping their noonday apéritif. An instant later, as Prike was bending over the desk examining the register, the room was populated with people who seemed to have materialised suddenly from nowhere. An Anamite waiter appeared in a doorway, over which was the sign "*Buvette.*" A dusky half-caste Tamil clerk elbowed Prike. Two giant bobbed-hair Pathans, with watchmen's clubs, hovered in the background. A door behind the desk opened and Jacques Vrai, his tiny Mongoloid eyes smouldering sullenly in his scaly face, strode forward to snatch the register from Prike's hands.

"No, Monsieur!" he exclaimed, slamming the heavy book shut. "You have no right here. You are an English *policier*. Chandernagore is French."

Prike nodded curtly. "Very well," he said quietly, "I was merely glancing at the names of recent arrivals. However, since you object I'll send for my friend, the Commissaire. He has jurisdiction and perhaps he will find reason to exercise it."

"Wait, monsieur." As Prike started away, Jacques Vrai leaned across the desk and caught his sleeve. His desperate effort at a conciliatory smile resulted only in an unsightly display of yellow, horse-like teeth. "I ask pardon, monsieur. Since the death of my poor Antoinette's fiancé, I am confused and agitated. What is it you wish, monsieur? We have no new guests."

"And the lady in room 22?" Prike asked.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. She came this morning. An American mistress of school with grey hairs and spectacles. Do you wish to speak with her?"

"Not now," said Prike. "I should like to speak to you first, Mr. Vrai."

"But certainly. Shall we go into the bar? We will be more tranquil——"

The bar was a dark, shuttered room, with the combined odours of sour beer, stale tobacco smoke and citronella arising from the stone floor. The silvering was peeling off the back of the cloudy mirror.

"What will you drink, monsieur?"

"Brandy," said Prike.

"How? *Sec* or with water?"

Prike glanced at the bottle Jacques Vrai placed on the zinc-topped bar. There were only three stars on the label.

"With soda," said Prike.

Vrai poured himself a Picon citron.

"Where is your—Mademoiselle Antoinette?" asked Prike.

"She is not far. Perhaps in the kitchen——"

"Or in Room 22?"

Jacques Vrai shrugged. "Shall I call her?"

"Not yet," said Prike. He put down his brandy peg and slipped his hands into his coat pockets. One hand touched the corrugated metal of his revolver butt. The other crackled the cablegram from the Perfect of Police at Nouméa. "Tell me, Mr. Vrai. At what time did you return to Chandernagore from Calcutta yesterday?"

Jacques Vrai took a long, thoughtful draught of his dark brown drink. "Quite late," he said. "We took the boat from Chandpal Ghat at six o'clock. I wished to return sooner, but my poor Antoinette, she was altogether prostrate by the tragedy of the morning. She rested in her room to compose herself——"

"In the Grand Hotel?"

"Yes."

"You know that Mr. Kurt Julius also had a room at the Grand?"

"*Comment?* Ah, yes, Julius. *Le marchand de fauves*. I know him."

"Did you see him before you left the hotel yesterday?"

"See him? Yes. In the bar. He was with two men. Two Americans. An American I do not know, and the Japanese American."

"Henry Kobayashi?"

"Yes. He did not stay long."

"Did you drink with them, Mr. Vrai?"

"No. That is, just one glass. A small one. A *chota walla*. I would not say drinking with them."

"What were they drinking?"

"I do not know. Ah, yes, I remember. Gin with

bitters." Jacques Vrai's fingers were nervously worrying the inflamed wings of his nostrils.

"What do you suppose killed Kurt Julius?" Prike's level gaze caused Vrai to close his eyes, as though to keep the inspector from seeing into his inmost thoughts. When he opened them again they were wide and staring.

"Killed? Julius?" Vrai exclaimed. "*Nom de Dieu!* I did not know he was dead. I had not heard. How——?"

"Did you attend Harrison Hoyt's bachelor dinner?" Prike pursued.

"No. It is not usual to invite the father of the bride——"

"But you went uninvited?"

"No, monsieur."

"Just for a moment? To speak to Mr. Hoyt at the head of the stairs?"

"No, monsieur."

Inspector Prike nodded. "You were seen. Several recognised you. A Mr. Lee Marvin, for instance."

"Ah, no, monsieur. He is mistaken." Jacques Vrai flung out both hands in a gesture of protest. Inspector Prike seized his right wrist, slowly turned it over.

"Where did you get this scar, Mr. Vrai?"

Vrai tugged frantically to release his arm. Prike held fast to his wrist.

"In—in Paris."

"How?"

"A knife," said Vrai. "A butcher knife. When I was a young man I worked for a butcher. An apprentice——"

Prike examined the scar closely, touched it with his finger. "How long ago was this?" he asked.

"Twenty-five, thirty years."

"This hasn't the appearance of an old wound," the inspector mused. "I should judge that it dates back no more than four or five years. The flesh seems to have been furrowed by a bullet."

"Ah, no, monsieur. You are mistaken. A knife." Again Vrai tried, in vain, to free his wrist.

"Were you ever shot during a hold-up, Mr. Vrai?"

"Me? I'm an honest man, monsieur. I am not rich, but I am honest. I am engaged here in an honest little commerce——"

"Did you ever know a man named Jean Georges Jules Honoré Marie Vorais, who was shot in the wrist during the robbery of the paymaster of a chromium mine in New Caledonia four years ago, and who escaped—with a considerable sum of money?"

At last Jacques Vrai jerked his wrist from the grasp of Inspector Prike. He got unsteadily to his feet. His colourless lips unmasked the yellow ivory of his teeth,

"*Nom de Dieu!*" he shouted. "You call me, an honest man, a robber?"

"I call you nothing. I am asking you a question."

"But I have never been in Nouvelle Caledonia!"

"Would you mind telling me, then, where you contracted that beautiful case of chronic chromium poisoning?"

"What case? What poison?" Jacques Vrai was trembling, either with the righteous indignation of the innocent, or the apprehension of the guilty about to be accused.

"With that ulcerated nose of yours and the skin that's scaling off, you might just as well wear a sign around your neck," said Inspector Prike.

"Ah, that. True, my nose has been *bien malade* since I was working for the Citroën automobile factory in Paris. I was—working with metals—plating——"

"With chromium, of course."

"Yes."

Inspector Prike shook his head. "Vrai," he said, "you've never been in Paris in your life. You've never been in France. You were born in New Caledonia, where your father was exiled for murder——"

"*Menteur!* You lie!"

"—and while I have neither the time nor inclination at the moment to go into my theories on the comparative influence of heredity and environment, I don't have to tell you that you, Jean Vorais, son of a murderer, are also suspected of murder."

"Murder? Me, monsieur? Who?"

"Harrison Hoyt, of course. And Kurt Julius."

Jacques Vrai recoiled as though he had been struck. He retreated several steps—towards a small door, Prike noticed—before he exclaimed, "But that is ridiculous! Why should I kill my poor Antoinette's fiancé?"

"Because," said Prike thrusting his hands into his pockets, as he moved farther after the retreating Vrai, "you did not want Antoinette to marry Hoyt."

"On the contrary, Monsieur. Hoyt was a nice young man. Very serious, very intelligent, the ideal husband for any young girl."

"But not for Antoinette. You hated Hoyt."

"But, monsieur, my daughter's future——"

"Your daughter!" The inspector's jaw advanced an eighth of an inch. "Antoinette is no more your daughter than her name is Antoinette Vrai. She was Mathilde Jabot in Nouméa when you fell in love with her and robbed a paymaster so that you could run away together. You have always been jealous of her because she is so much younger than you. For years you have been brooding because she insists on posing as your daughter. When you were about to lose her

definitely to Hoyt, it seems logical that your jealousy might have reached a point of madness, a point of committing——”

“No!” The crimson nostrils of Jacques Vrai quivered like a rabbit’s, the only movement in his cadaverous face. His hands twitched at his sides.

“—murder,” continued Prike, “for the sake of keeping your Antoinette.”

“You are speaking of me, my friends?”

The shrill, rasping sound of a woman’s voice behind him caused Prike to turn. In the doorway from the lobby stood Antoinette Vrai, her dark eyes flashing hate, her blue-black hair radiating from her head like the corona of an eclipse, her fists punched deep into the vivid green hips of her silken dress.

CHAPTER XXI

"BONJOUR, Mathilde," said Prike.

Antoinette's fists sank deeper into her ample hips. Her sharp elbows jerked backward until the waist of her diaphanous green dress outlined tautly the challenging contours of her pointed breasts.

"My name," she said, "is Antoinette. To you it is Mademoiselle Vrai."

Inspector Prike bowed with apparent submission. "Quite right," he said. "I am not particularly interested in Mathilde Jabot. What happened in New Caledonia concerns only the French authorities. I am rather preoccupied at the moment with things that happened in Calcutta—and at Jharnpur."

"Jharnpur?" Antoinette, her elbows still defiant, advanced several steps into the bar-room. The two Pathan giants sauntered in behind her, swinging their long *lathis* absent-mindedly but resoundingly against the door frames.

"Jharnpur," Prike repeated. "I will save you the embarrassment of being caught in a lie by informing you that in consulting the register just now I happened to notice that Sree Rangam Bahadur was a guest at your hotel last month. It is no secret that this is the Maharajah of Jharnpur's family name which he uses when he wishes to remain more or less incognito."

Antoinette's chin went up two inches. "It is no secret either," she declared, "that His Highness is fond of French cooking. He had heard of my *poulet marengo*."

"Was it to discuss cooking," asked Prike, "that you visited the Maharajah at his palace in Jharnpur one night a week later?"

"Comment?"

"You were seen," said Prike, "by the same person who informs me that you returned to Jharnpur again five nights later—doubtless to discuss gastronomy."

Antoinette glowered at Prike down the thin ridge of her nose. Then she burst into shrill laughter.

"After all, why not?" she laughed. "I wear skirts, no? That is all one needs to be invited by the Maharajah of Jharnpur."

"Isn't it true," Prike demanded, "that on the occasion of your last visit Jacques Vrai popped up rather unexpectedly and raised a considerable rumpus because you were—well, in no condition to make a public appearance?"

Antoinette Vrai looked narrowly at Prike as though she were uncertain if he were guessing or speaking from positive knowledge. Jacques Vrai, too, was staring at Prike. He stopped in the process of pouring himself a drink and held the bottle poised in mid-air. He glanced at Antoinette—who again burst out laughing.

"But Jacques is used to that," she gasped when she had caught her breath. "Why should he make a—a rumpus?"

Jacques Vrai set down his bottle with an angry thump.

"Because," said Prike his tone as sharp as a rapier thrust, "the two of you were working the badger game on the Maharajah."

"Badger game. What is that?"

"Extortion. You forced His Highness to give you some very valuable jewels as a price for not causing scandal."

"Jewels?" Antoinette lighted a cigarette, drew the smoke deep into her lungs and punctuated her words with little puffs of grey vapour. "You mean that funny

necklace? The stones were very badly mounted—very crude——”

“Then you did get it?”

“Get it? His Highness gave it to me—in a moment of affection. He is a dear and very nice but the necklace was really not very pretty.”

“I’m sure this moment of affection corresponded very closely with the moment of Jacques Vrai’s untimely arrival upon a compromising scene,” Prike said.

“But no. His Highness gave the necklace to me, not to Jacques. It was a gift to me.”

“I wonder if you would show me the gift?”

Antoinette advanced her under lip. Smoke curled out to rise along her cheeks.

“I no longer have it. His Highness had a change of heart. I do not know why he regretted his generosity—I was very nice to him—but he took it back.”

“His Highness took it back—personally?”

“Well no. I was not going to give it back at first. To me a gift is a gift. But poor Mr. Hoyt said His Highness was very angry and would make trouble. I don’t know why——”

“Did you tell Hoyt about this?”

“Oh no. His Highness told poor Mr. Hoyt. Mr. Hoyt came to give us the friendly warning. He said, ‘I will take the necklace back to the Maharajah, otherwise the Maharajah will make a process of law against you in the courts and you will both go in prison.’ Then Jacques said, ‘The Maharajah will not take us before the courts because he already has a *mauvaise presse* and must take care for his reputation with the English.’ And my poor Harry Hoyt said, ‘All right, do as you please. Only remember that a Maharajah can keep his name secret in the courts. Just recall the Maharajah who made a prosecution against the bookmaker’s wife in London but nobody knew him

except as Mr. A.' So I gave the necklace to poor Harry to give back to the Maharajah."

Antoinette was telling her story with great animation of all her features, her hands, even her torso. Her expressive fingers made points of emphasis dangerously close to Inspector Prike's imperturbable nose.

"You knew, of course," said Prike quietly, "that Harrison Hoyt, having applied American mass production methods to the business of blackmail, would try to wring an exorbitant sum from the Maharajah."

"Oh no, monsieur." Antoinette's dark eyes grew unconvincingly round with innocent amazement. "Why should I think that?"

Perhaps you didn't," said Prike. "In which case you would have been considerably upset and charged to discover that Hoyt was double-crossing you by working his own extortion game on the Maharajah——"

"Cross me? Oh no, monsieur——"

"—and you might very well have gone to Hoyt to demand your share in the *chantage* money!"

"Oh no, monsieur."

"Isn't it a fact that on Thursday you discovered that Hoyt had not yet returned the necklace to the Maharajah, but was dickering for extortion money? Didn't you send Jacques Vrai to Peliti's restaurant on the night of Hoyt's bachelor dinner to threaten him unless he either returned the necklace or give you a substantial share of the blackmail?"

"Threaten my fiancé? Oh, monsieur."

"Jacques Vrai would have been very glad to threaten Hoyt—from personal as well as financial reasons. And Jacques Vrai was seen talking to Hoyt at Peliti's."

Jacques Vrai slapped the marble-topped table with the flat of his hand.

"You must not believe this Marvin!" he shouted.

"He was maybe drunk. He did not see me. He made a mistake. It was some one else he saw. He——"

"I was under the impression," Prike interrupted quietly, "that Mr. Marvin had known you long enough not to mistake your identity."

Before Jacques Vrai could reply, Antoinette said, "Lee Marvin? Yes, he is an old, old friend."

"Then you of course know where Mr. Marvin lives in Calcutta," said Prike.

"He has never invited me to his apartment."

"He has never invited Jacques Vrai, either," said the detective, "yet I strongly suspect that he has been there—recently."

"Never!" Jacques Vrai declared.

"There is a mango tree in the compound," said Prike, "which gives convenient access to Mr. Marvin's window."

There was a pause. Jacques Vrai's fingers closed nervously about the Amer Picon bottle.

I detest mangoes," said Antoinette. "They taste of turpentine."

Inspector Prike reached across the table, snatched the bottle from the hands of Jacques Vrai.

"Thank you," the inspector said, holding the bottle carefully by the neck, "for a perfect set of fingerprints. I found an ebony jewel case under Mr. Marvin's mango tree yesterday which bore, in addition to the crest of the Maharajah of Jharnpur, some fingerprints which I imagine might very well match the ones on this bottle. I——"

With a deep-mouthed roar like the unfuried bellowing of a cornered animal, Jacques Vrai lunged across the table, grabbed at the bottle.

Prike stepped, back whipped out his gun.

The two Pathan giants closed in from the rear, clubs swinging.

Antoinette screamed imprecations in French and English.

One Pathan arm crooked, flashed back and up. The club cleft the air. Prike sidestepped. The club fanned his ear, glanced off his shoulder.

Jacques Vrai kicked over the table. Glasses and bottles crashed to the floor.

Prike's gun spat flaming thunder.

The cloudy mirror behind the bar shivered into a thousand jingling fragments.

Shrieking with rage and terror, Antoinette picked up bottles, hurled them wildly.

Prike slipped in a puddle of spilled Amer Picon, went down. The Pathans pounced on him, their *lathis* working like flails.

A door slammed.

Antoinette picked up a chair. Before she could swing it, Inspector Prike had wriggled agilely to his feet, had the two hillmen staring stupidly into the muzzle of his gun.

"*Bas!*" he commanded, his voice unruffled, "*Goli marta hai!*"

The Pathans dropped their clubs.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the drip of brandy from a broken bottle on the bar. The fumes of alcohol blended with the acrid smell of burned powder. Prike looked calmly about the room.

Jacques Vrai was gone!

Antoinette threw back her head and gave vent to throaty peals of hearty, malicious glee.

"And the bottle's broken!" She laughed. "Your finger-prints——"

"There were no finger-prints on the ebony jewel case I picked up under Mr. Marvin's mango tree," said Prike nonchalantly smoothing out the wrinkles of his alpaca coat with his free hand. "However,

had I found any, I know now whose they would have been. Jacques Vrai has just made a silent confession of the theft of the *nao-raïna* from Marvin's flat. Please open that door, my dear Mathilde—or should I say 'Antoinette'?"

"It is locked. It leads only to the wine cellar."

"Then unlock it."

"It can be bolted from the inside."

"Unusual arrangement for a wine cellar," mused Prike. "In that case we will break it down. Should—Ah, bonjour, Monsieur le Commissaire."

Prike turned to greet the Commissaire of Police of Chandernagore, who at that moment appeared in the doorway, flanked by two sergeants.

"Monsieur l'Inspecteur!" The Commissaire started forward when he recognised Prike. Then he stopped and flung his hands wide, at the sight of the shambles the bar-room had become. "But there has been a riot!" he exclaimed. "Shall I send for more men? Have you been hurt? I heard a shot, and I came at once. What has happened?"

"Nothing has happened," said Prike blandly. "Nothing of any importance. I was testing a theory, that is all. What can you tell me about the wine cellars of the Hotel Duplex, Monsieur le Commissaire?"

"You wish——?" The Commissaire frowned at the phlegmatic character of his British colleague who could think of wines in the midst of serious disorder. Then he smiled. "I understand, Monsieur l'Inspecteur," he resumed. "You are joking. You have trapped a criminal in the *cave*. I will send for grenades, gas-bombs, and *mitrailleuses*. It is dangerous to venture into a cellar after a desperate man without preparation. Afterward we can break down the door."

"There is no hurry," said Inspector Prike, bending down to set an overturned table upright. "The

door can be forced at our pleasure, and I think the situation downstairs will remain unchanged for a few moments. Sit down, Monsieur le Commissaire, if you can find a whole chair. Perhaps Mademoiselle Antoinette will be able to find an unbroken bottle and serve us an apéritif while I ask her a few questions. I should like you to hear the answers, monsieur."

With a silk handkerchief, Prike wiped a fleck of blood from a scratch on his bald head, and drew up a chair. The puzzled Commissaire sat down opposite him. Antoinette, glowering, replaced her hands on her hips.

CHAPTER XXII

"MONSIEUR LE COMMISSAIRE," Prike began, keeping his eyes on Antoinette, "are you familiar with the wine cellar of this hotel?"

"Sufficiently," replied the French official. "The red wines are passable. The Clos Vougeot 1921 is even good. But the Chablis is vinegar, the Barsac——"

"Is there any saké?" Prike broke in.

"Saké? That vile Japanese infusion of rice beetles in varnish? I hope not!"

Prike's fingers drummed the table top as his eyes continued to ask the question of Antoinette Vrai.

Antoinette shrugged. "We have clients of all nationalities," she said. "We must have the drinks that please them. We have vodka for the Russians, aquavit for the Swedes, even whisky and gin for the leather gullets of English and Americans."

"And saké for the Japanese?"

"Naturally."

"You have had many Japanese guests at the Hôtel Dupleix?"

"A few."

"Among them a man named Henry Kobayashi?"

"I cannot remember all their names."

Prike consulted his watch. "You will have an opportunity to remember faces," he said. "Henry Kobayashi should be here in a few moments."

Antoinette carelessly draped one silken thigh over the edge of the marble table-top. She smiled at the cigarette butt she stamped out on the marble between the inspector's hands.

"He is coming no doubt to taste my saké," she said.

"He is coming," said Prike, "to help clear up an

important question in the relationship between you, Mademoiselle Antoinette Mathilde, and the late Harrison Hoyt."

"But there is no more Harry Hoyt. How can there be any more relationship?"

"*Assez de chinoiseries!*" Prike snapped. He was beginning to show his annoyance with the round eyes of factitious innocence that Antoinette was effecting. "A woman who has been living by her wits for as long as you have must know certainly that I would not be quite this extravagant with my time and effort if I were dealing merely with the murder of a worthless American blackmailer whose death has caused very few tears—particularly in my department. There are larger issues involved."

Antoinette's mouth became a scornful inverted crescent.

"Of course," she said. "Your promotion, no doubt. Perhaps a decoration from your King-Emperor."

"I am interested in the murder of Harrison Hoyt," said Prike, "solely because, two days before his death, I had begun to investigate the entry of contraband arms into India. I know that Hoyt was involved, and I am equally convinced that you were his accomplice."

"Arms? Me?" Antoinette planted the palms of her hands on the table behind her, leaned back, and unloosed a salvo of deep, full-chested laughter. Inspector Prike noted, however, that her lips clung closer to her teeth than was usual when she engaged in her characteristic displays of explosive gaiety. "Arms!" she gasped. "I have my own arms. They always get what they want. Why should I make *contrabande*? Ridiculous."

Prike stood up and faced the door. He had heard the sound of a motor stopping in front of the hotel.

A few seconds later Deputy Inspector Robbins

marched into the bar-room with his right hand clenched about the arm of Henry Kobayashi.

"Here he is, inspector," said Robbins, "though I still can't see for the life o' me why you didn't want me to keep this bloke in Calcutta. I'd keep him busy till you got good and ready for him. But up here, he's out of our jurisdiction, and——"

"I know," interrupted Prike. "Sit down, both of you."

Henry Kobayashi swaggered up to Prike, grinning like a chimpanzee, and held out his hand.

"Howdy, chief," he said. "Still giving me the works, I see. What is all this—more third degree?"

Prike nodded, but did not shake hands. He gestured toward a chair. Kobayashi sat down, still grinning.

Aside from his flaring cheek bones and the lack of lashes over his straight, elongated eyes, Henry Kobayashi appeared more American than Japanese. His birth in Honolulu and his education in the American schools there had left a stronger mark upon him, at least externally, than his Oriental blood. His intonations, his mannerisms, the cut of his white clothes and the tilt of his topee, the red and blue stripes of his silk cravat and the diamond-studded horseshoe of his watch charm—All were as American as hot cakes and maple syrup.

"Mr. Kobayashi," said Prike, "I'd like to introduce you to Miss Antoinette Vrai."

"Don't bother," Kobayashi replied. "Tony and me are buddies."

"You met her with Hoyt, of course?"

"Sure. Poor old Harry and me used to come up here for a week-end now and then."

"On business?"

"Not exactly." Kobayashi's grin became reminiscent. "Harry used to say that Chandernagore was a swell quiet place to get tight at. And it sure is."

"You are representative in India for the Osaka

Cotton Spinners' Mutual Export Association. Is that right, Mr. Kobayashi ? ”

“ You bet it is.”

“ Then to save you from unnecessary lying in answering my next questions,” Prike pursued, “ I think I should share this bit of information with you : The Singapore police several days ago seized a shipment of five thousand Japanese-made machine guns, destined for Calcutta. These arms were packed in cases labelled ‘ cotton goods,’ bearing the imprint of the Osaka Cotton Spinners’ Mutual Export Association.”

Henry Kobayashi’s grin flickered and went out. His bronze face turned a peculiar brassy yellow.

“ There—there must be some mistake,” he stammered. “ Some forgery or something.”

“ There was no mistake in the fact that the shipment was consigned to Harrison Hoyt,” said Prike. “ As a matter of fact, you knew that shipments of arms, disguised as Japanese cotton goods, had been coming to Hoyt for some time.”

“ How in hell should I know that ? ”

“ Because you have been associated with Hoyt in business for nearly a year.”

“ Business, sure. But no monkey business,” said Kobayashi, nervously biting the end off a large fat cigar. “ I—I don’t know anything about any machine guns.”

“ As a matter of fact, your visits to Chandernagore with Hoyt were for the purpose of arranging a cache for your machine guns, were they not ? ”

“ Hell, no ! ” exclaimed Kobayashi, sliding to the edge of his chair. “ We came here to get tight.”

“ Pay no attention,” Antoinette admonished him. “ He is *dingo* ! Crazy ! I think he takes *stupéfiants*, the inspector ! ”

“ Listen to this, please,” said Inspector Prike taking a memorandum book from his pocket. “ Since

the first of the year, 3,650 tons of Japanese cotton goods have been cleared through the customs at the port of Calcutta, all by Harrison Hoyt. Every consignment, on being cleared, was reshipped to the little river town of Hooghly, five miles north of here. Don't you think, Mr. Kobayashi, that this is rather an excessive amount of cotton goods to meet the simple Hindu needs of a small town of perhaps 20,000 population, which also buys cotton *dhotis* and *saris* from Manchester, to say nothing of *swadeshi* cotton ? ”

“ I—not necessarily,” said Kobayashi, taking an unusually long time to light his cigar. “ Maybe there's some distributor at Hooghly with a big district to sell. I don't know, of course. I don't know anything about Hoyt's business at Hooghly.”

“ The day before Hoyt was killed,” Prike interrupted, “ I discovered the rather interesting fact that every one of Hoyt's cotton shipments was cleared from the customs just before closing time—so that the trip up the river was invariably made in the dark.”

“ What's funny about that,” Kobayashi objected. “ That Howrah pontoon bridge don't open for river traffic except at night.”

“ Nothing particularly funny,” said Prike, “ except that I have been unable to find a record of any of Hoyt's shipments being received at Hooghly.”

“ So what ? ”

“ So I am forced to conclude,” the inspector continued, “ that instead of being shipped to Hooghly, the—well, cotton goods, were landed in the dark, somewhere en route, say at Serampore, or Jharnpur—or Chandernagore ! ”

“ Chandernagore ! ” Antoinette shook her head violently. “ I tell you the man is *dingo* ! ”

“ You're all wet, chief ! ” protested Kobayashi, with a wave of his cigar which was trembling between his

fingers. "If you brought me up here to talk about machine guns, you're wasting time."

"I think not," said Prike quietly. "I think Chandernagore would be an excellent place for Hoyt to hide his smuggled arms. The anachronistic political arrangement here would keep his cache away from the prying eyes of the British, who would be most concerned. And his fiancée would be constantly on hand to keep watch over the contraband. Very logical."

"But what's that got to do with me?" Kobayashi insisted.

"You admit that you were associated with Hoyt?"

"Sure, but——"

"That's a damaging admission, Kobayashi."

"Now, listen, chief. Why should it be damaging? Hoyt was——"

"Hoyt was engaged in activities obviously hostile to the safety of the British Empire. You were his associate."

"But to me Hoyt wasn't any gun-runner. He was a press agent. You see, chief, this Osaka crowd sent me to India because they knew that even with the *yen* way down and cheap goods to sell, they were up against a tough proposition. During the war, with German goods cut out, there was a lot of Japanese junk dumped into this market. The trouble was, it *was* junk: Pencils with only an inch of lead in each end; watches with no works in 'em; all that sort of stuff. So now people are kind of shy of Japanese goods, and my job is to break down that feeling. They sent me because I know English, and I'm pretty hep to high-pressure American methods, from living down in Honolulu. First thing I do, is hire a press agent, and it happens to be Hoyt."

"A good blind," mused Prike.

"But what would I want to get mixed up in gun-running for?"

"Money," said Prike, "is always a strong sedative for the most virulent case of scruples. Besides, you might conceivably look upon yourself as performing a patriotic duty. Since Japan recently embarked on her new course of Empire, she has made no effort to disguise her policy of 'Asia for the Asiatics.' Organising India for an armed revolt against the British would be quite consistent with such a policy."

"But I—I——" Henry Kobayashi's cigar had gone out, and he was having considerable difficulty in re-lighting it. He had broken three matches when a hubbub of voices in the hotel verandah diverted attention from his increasing confusion.

Above the rumbling of several masculine voices came the halting, excited, half-gasping treble of a woman. A man was shouting for the police.

Deputy Inspector Robbins sprang to his feet, hurried toward the voices. Antoinette's lips pressed together in expectant enmity. The Commissaire de Police verified the twisted ends of his black moustache then jumped up. Inspector Prike leaned forward a trifle.

Henry Kobayashi closed his eyes a moment in obvious relief. When he opened them, almost immediately, they were drawn sharply to an unlatched shutter that was swinging gently in the hot wind that breathed gustily through an open window. Kobayashi arose, covered the room with quick, apprehensive glances. He was only three silent steps from the low window sill. . . .

At that moment the doorway from the lobby framed an odd group. Chitterji Rao and George Linnet paused on the threshold, like matinee idols awaiting the burst of applause following their first entrance cue. Behind them, her hair straggling damply to her cheeks, her wet muddy clothing moulding the graceful lines of her young, budding body, stood the dripping figure of Evelyn Branch, leaning on the equally wet Lee Marvin.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN he ran down the stairs of the *Anglo-Bengal Times* building, loped through the night and hailed a cruising taxi in Dalhousie Square, Lee Marvin was beginning to enjoy his game of hide and seek with the C.I.D. He could have done very well without the grim note of sudden death which seemed such an integral part of the game, but since neither Hoyt nor Julius were particularly admirable nor sympathetic humans, he was surprised to find that he rather liked the added zest of danger. To the taxi-walla's query, "*Kidhar, Sahib?*" he replied without hesitation, "*Guru's Lane,*" knowing perfectly well that he could expect to cross the police again at Mrs. Pereira's. He wanted a show-down with Evelyn Branch.

He was faintly incredulous when Mrs. Pereira's sleepy *durwan* told him that the Mem-sahib he was seeking had gone away an hour ago in a motor-car belonging to the Maharajah of Jharnpur. He bribed the *durwan* to let him into the house, and was standing in the hall when Deputy Inspector Robbins arrived, got the same story from the *durwan* and drove away again. Then Marvin came out, increased his bribe, and asked to be let into the Mem-sahib's room.

The first thing he saw was the note in the copper-plate hand, on Evelyn Branch's night table, asking her to come to the Alipore Palace. Then in succession he noted the girl's bed in disorder, her flimsy silk night-dress thrown over the back of a chair, a fluffy pink slipper near the door half-way across the room from its mate, the *punkah* still whirling overhead—all signs that Evelyn had been aroused from sleep and had

left hurriedly. Well, he would wait for her to come back. He couldn't quite bring himself to probe into her personal effects, which lay about the room with a disturbing sense of intimacy ; that wouldn't be cricket. But he would certainly surprise her on her return. Hadn't she waited for him in his flat ? He put out the light and sat down. In five minutes he was asleep. . . .

Daylight awoke him. When his startled eyes had oriented him, he looked at his watch. He had slept for three hours—which was worse than nothing. He had a bitter, woolly, sleepless taste in his mouth. Evelyn had not come back. Or had she come and gone ? He looked at himself in a mirror and scowled at his reflection. He looked worse than he felt. That manly stubble on his chin and the fatigue circles under his eyes needed only a felony number around his neck to complete a rogue's gallery photograph. He left the house quietly and went home.

At his Theatre Road flat, his bearer was waiting with a hot bath, a tall glass of cold water, two aspirin tablets, and a cable from the London office of Orfèvre, Ltd.

"Close soonest Bosa pearl ; offer three thousand higher if necessary," the cable read. That was his mistake. He should never have mentioned the Bosa pearl to the home office without a more substantial basis than Harrison Hoyt's word. He'd have to make good on it now. He'd go out to Alipore after breakfast, he reflected as he bathed. . . .

When he started lathering his face for shaving he remembered a little .32 calibre revolver that was tucked away at the bottom of a drawer under his clean shirts. He never used it, but it might be a good idea to take it along to Alipore. Every step he'd taken these last few days seemed to get him deeper into trouble. Of course, he could let the whole matter

drop, charge up the eight thousand rupees to his own profit and loss, and cable London that the Bosa pearl was no longer available. That would be the easiest way out. Orfèvre, Ltd. didn't expect him to jeopardise his life deliberately for the sake of a few thousand pounds' profit. He knew, though, that he would certainly go to the Alipore Palace—and it wasn't because that girl was there, either. Damn that girl with the long slim legs and the provocative ankles and the proud blonde head and the trusting lips that he had come so near to kissing before they put him off by uttering sharp, distrustful words! He must think a lot of the girl, to resent so strongly the feeling that she was putting something over on him. Funny, how it hurts to play second fiddle to a girl you really like. . . . But he was sure she wasn't the reason for his going to Alipore. No, it was because he had had the Bosa pearl in his hands, had lost it, and was feeling a little silly and with more than a little bitter wrath over the whole business. . . .

“ Sahib ? ”

Marvin's bearer came into the bathroom with a slip of paper in his hand.

“ Damn ! ” Marvin cut himself. He always cut his chin when he allowed himself to become introspective while shaving. Some day he would cut that dimple off, and good riddance! He reached for the styptic pencil with one hand and the note with the other.

The folded paper was gummed together around the edges with some pink substance that smelled faintly of ether and bananas. Marvin tore it open. Inside, in a small, tight backhand, was written :

“ I think I have caught Harry Hoyt's murderer. This probably doesn't interest you, but I am telling you because I may have trouble letting go of him.

I haven't the slightest idea where I am now, but we are going to Chandernagore, wherever that is. It seems we are calling on Miss Vrai. You probably have decided I am a fool, and I am rapidly coming to the same conclusion myself, but if you are not too disgusted with me, will you please come?

"EVELYN BRANCH."

Marvin tossed the note aside. Was this an apology or a trap? A trap, probably. The girl thought he still had the Bosa pearl. She hadn't believed him last night when he told her it had been stolen, and she was still hell-bent on getting her hands on it. She was a determined woman, and determined women are dangerous. There had been a murder a day since Evelyn Branch arrived in Calcutta. Why did she want him up there at Chandernagore, in French territory?

Marvin stooped, picked up the note again. Chandernagore. . . . Vrai. . . . The man at the head of the stairs at Peliti's had certainly looked like Jacques Vrai. What if Evelyn had tracked the Bosa pearl to Vrai in Chandernagore, had got into a jam, and was sincerely in need of Marvin's help? The note had a makeshift appearance, all right—sealed with something that smelled of nail polish—as though it had been secretly written and smuggled out under suspicious eyes. Probably the girl had intended it that way. Probably she hoped to appeal to what she thought was his sentimental nature. Well, he wasn't sentimental. He crumpled the note and went on shaving.

By mid-morning he was on his way to Chandernagore.

Marvin headed directly for the Hotel Dupleix, but he stopped his car a hundred yards from his destination when he saw another motor drive up ahead of him and the deputy inspector get out with Henry Kobayashi.

When Robbins went into the hotel Marvin approached

on foot. He stood on the verandah for some time, listening. He recognised the voices of Prike, Robbins, Henry Kobayashi, and the coarse laugh of Antoinette Vrai. He did not hear the voice of Evelyn Branch. Where was she? She certainly did not need his protection, with the C.I.D. out in force. Had he been right in regarding her note as a ruse? He sauntered to the end of the verandah and lit a cigarette. Then he saw people running toward the river front, a short distance away. He followed warily.

Pushing his way through the crowd gathering at the *ghats*, Marvin saw a *bunder* boat, a clumsy native craft with one dirty patched sail, tacking madly against the swirling current of the brown river, trying to get out of the way of a fast, trim motor launch. He shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun on the water and saw a girl standing knee-deep in a cargo of jute which was piled on the foredeck of the *bunder* boat like unbaled hay. Her hair, the colour of the jute, blew free in the river breeze. She was shouting to the speed boat. Marvin understood the word "murder . . ." He saw Rufus Dormer rise behind Evelyn Branch to put his hand over her mouth. She struggled. . . .

The speed boat swung farther toward the sailing craft in a foaming circle. In the cockpit of the launch Marvin saw a tall Hindu with a pale green turban and a square-jawed European in a khaki topee—George Linnet.

The *bunder* boat tacked again—suddenly, awkwardly. The sail flapped with wild impatience, then bellied out with a quick gust. The *bunder* boat capsized.

Marvin threw off his coat and topee, leaped down the *ghat* steps, flung himself into the muddy water, started swimming. As he lifted his head to breathe, he saw the wet, air-filled sail lying on the wrinkled brown

skin of the river like a huge blister, turning slowly in an eddy as it drifted down stream. He heard Evelyn's breathless shout, "Stop him! . . . He's getting away!" He saw Rufus Dormer swimming frantically toward shore.

A few swift, powerful strokes and Marvin was alongside the girl. She was clinging to the sternpost of the capsized craft.

"Why—didn't you—head him off?" she gasped reproachfully.

"You have three guesses," said Marvin.

"But look!"

Marvin glanced over his shoulder. Dormer was climbing out of the water, running up the bank. The speed boat was nosing into shore, too. George Linnet jumped from the fore deck of the launch and started in pursuit. The two men disappeared in the crowd of Hindus gathered on the *ghat*.

"The colonel has landed and has the situation well in hand," said Marvin. He grasped the sternpost, and with his free arm boosted the girl out of the water to the upturned bottom of the *bunder* boat. Instantly she slid off the wet planks into Marvin's arms. This time he got one knee on the rudder, and lifted both himself and the girl on to the hulk. He found with no little satisfaction that he had to keep his arm around her to keep her from slipping back.

"I hope you're enjoying your visit to India," said Marvin. "At least, there's never a dull moment."

"Travel is so broadening," Evelyn replied. "One meets such interesting people. . . ."

"And in such interesting places. And one does such interesting things." Lee Marvin was wound up to get really sarcastic, but somehow he couldn't unwind. The girl looked so damned fragile and helpless. He resented his own amazement at so much loveliness inherent in

a dripping, bedraggled body which according to rules, should be either comic or definitely unattractive. No amount of cosmetic skill could possibly produce this illusion of unadorned beauty, of exquisite grace, of artless, vital charm, he mused. He could feel the warmth of her firm young shoulders through the clinging dampness of her blouse, and his pulse gained ten beats.

"I certainly didn't expect to meet you again *this* way!" Evelyn smiled at Marvin. "I suppose I *am* a fool."

"I still don't know whether you're a fool or a little crook or just a good girl with bad friends," said Marvin. "But I have a definite feeling that you're in great need of a sound and thorough spanking."

"I don't believe in corporal punishment. I hope you haven't come all this way just to be spiteful and sadistic."

"My explanation for being here," said Marvin, "can wait until we get to dry land. There doesn't seem to be much privacy in this shipwreck. We have company."

At that moment, Chitterji Rao's launch, manned by uniformed lascars, had just poked a sleek bow against the side of the *bunder* boat.

The Hindu seemed no more enthusiastic over the rescue than did Marvin, but he helped both the girl and the red-head aboard the launch, which put about immediately and streaked for shore.

George Linnet was standing on the landing *ghat*, shouting through cupped hands.

"One of you birds who can talk this God-awful language come ashore and yell for the police!" he called. "Dormer got away. I lost him among those warehouses back of that hotel . . ."

"The Hotel Duplex is full of police—who speak

English," Marvin replied, as the launch was being made fast.

Two minutes later the strange quartet entered the hotel bar.

Deputy Inspector Robbins' eyes bulged when he saw Marvin.

"I'll be a such of a which!" he exclaimed. "If this chap Marvin ain't popped up again—and out of the river, this time."

"Inspector Prike," said Linnet, "that man Dormer you were looking for at Alipore last night is in Chandernagore. I just chased him into narrow alleys back to the hotel and he lost me. You'd better send your men after him."

Prike said something in French to the Commissaire de Police. The Commissaire shouted a command to the sergeant in the doorway.

"I think we've cut off Mr. Dormer's escape from Chandernagore," said Prike. "And now I'd like to know a little more about this—swimming party."

"Rufus Dormer practically confessed to me that he killed Harry Hoyt!" Evelyn Branch declared.

"Thank you," said Prike, "for solving my case for me. And congratulations on an extremely skilful job of shadowing. How long have you been following Rufus Dormer, lieutenant—I should say 'Colonel'—Linnet?"

"We ran into him by accident," said Linnet. "He was taking Miss Branch up the river somewhere. Chitterji Rao and I were on our way up to Jharnpur in the Maharajah's speed boat, when——"

"We were on our way to Jharnpur," purred Chitterji Rao, "at the suggestion of His Highness, to prepare for Colonel Linnet's tiger hunt. We were not far from the landing *ghat* here at Chandernagore, when we passed quite close to a *bunder* boat. Miss Branch

who was on the boat with Dormer, recognised us, and shouted to Colonel Linnet for help. I had our helm put about quickly. The *bunder* boat tried to get away, and in the confusion, capsized. Both Dormer and Miss Branch were thrown into the muddy water——”

“Then Lee Marvin, who was standing on the bank, jumped in and rescued me,” Evelyn Branch chimed in.

“And I picked them both up,” added Chitterji Rao, “after putting Colonel Linnet ashore.”

“But Dormer had too much of a start on me,” said Linnet. “If I were you, Prike——”

“I’m sorry you had to interfere, Linnet,” said Prike. “I was rather expecting Rufus Dormer, just as I was expecting—— Hello, Robbins, what have you done with Kobayashi?”

“Kobayashi?” Deputy Inspector Robbins scratched his head. “Why, he was sitting there half a jiffy ago. I wonder. . . . I’m damned if that squint-eyed little boulder didn’t slip out on us! Don’t worry, inspector, I’ll——”

Antoinette’s Vrai’s husky guffaws echoed in the bar-room as Deputy Inspector Robbins jumped for the door.

“Robbins!”

“Yes, inspector,” The deputy turned sheepishly.

“Let him go for the moment, Robbins. But unless you show yourself a little more alert and intelligent, Robbins, I shall have you put up for a seat in the Legislative Councils. In the meantime, you might ask Mademoiselle Antoinette to get a dry change for Miss Branch.”

“I’d rather not wear anything of hers,” Evelyn protested. “I’m not that wet.”

“It’s dangerous to keep on wet clothing. . . .”

“I’m sure I have nothing good enough for the *grande dame*!” Antoinette retorted, eyeing Evelyn’s

muddy raiment. "She would die if she did not wear the finest silks."

"Very tactful, inspector, to bring Harry Hoyt's fiancées together like this." Evelyn Branch's lips were pressed tightly together.

"Go along, Antoinette. I don't want the girl to catch pneumonia. But hurry. In ten minutes I'm going to search your room."

The two women, bristling with mutual antagonism, left the bar. Lee Marvin looked after them.

"If there's nothing more we can do, Prike," began Linnet.

"Just a moment. Robbins, I want you to stay here with Marvin, Linnet and Chitterji Rao, while I——" The inspector stopped suddenly.

During that instant of silence there was a perceptible movement in the room. Heads turned. Feet shifted. Even Prike's expression changed.

Into the hot stillness there crawled a horrid sound that raised cold ridges of flesh on Marvin's back. A hoarse, quivering groan, like the last muted shriek of anguish from some lost soul with no more strength to cry out but no courage to die in silence, trembled on all ears. A groan that sobbed out all of human despair; all of human pain, seemed to arise from somewhere beneath the earth, somewhere far away, then gurgled into nothingness.

The Commissaire de Police was on his feet.

"Monsieur l'Inspecteur," he said, "perhaps we have delayed too long our visit to the wine cellar."

Prike too, sprang up.

"Break down the door!" he ordered.

Beneath the blows of an axe, the small door behind the bar disintegrated into rotten kindling.

A gust of cold, damp air surged from the opening, a smell of mould and wine lees.

Inspector Prike descended three sweating stone steps. The commissaire was close behind him. Marvin, Robbins, Linnet and Chitterji Rao crowded into the doorway to watch.

A cone of light wheeled slowly through the gloom as Prike's flashlamp explored the cellar.

" *Au nom de la loi, je vous ordonne de vous rendre !* " commanded the French police official.

The echo buzzed and hummed mockingly in the half darkness. There was no other answer.

Inspector Prike went down two more steps. He held nothing in his hands but the flashlight. He paused, but the muffled moan of anguish, the quavering cry of despair was not repeated.

Prike was at the bottom of the stairway. He started down an alley between two wine-racks, his flashlight sliding over the down-slanting necks of scores of bottles, ranged in rows like the myriad legs of some legendary millipede. Dusty labels glowed and went out : Macon, Vouvray, Graves . . .

From the rafter overhead, long fingers of grey fungus reached down in ghostly garlands to brush his face with their clammy touch. Inspector Prike disappeared round the corner of a wine-rack. From the other side his light shone through the bottles like ribs of a luminous fan. There was no sound except the soft, almost fearful, tread of feet.

The Inspector stooped over, rubbing the dust from several racked brandy bottles. He frowned his disapproval, rose, and continued his way. His light gleamed on the damp walls, made deformed shadows tumble across the floor in a *danse macabre* and slither up over the wine-racks. At the far end of the cellar an array of pot-bellied casks and barrels stood out in purple outline.

Inspector Prike stopped for a long moment in an

attitude of listening. Only the rhythm of breathing and a faint dripping sound from some leaky wine spigot broke the silence.

With deliberate strides Prike walked toward the wine casks. If Jacques Vrai was still in the cellar, he must be hiding among the barrels. Prike had made a complete examination of the rest of the underground room.

Still Prike did not draw his gun. His light roved over the barrels, shimmering on a barrier of unbroken spider webs that evidently precluded the possibility of any one hiding behind them. His left knuckles rapped against the barrel staves in the wake of the light, seeking the solid thump that would tell him the level of the wine inside.

One particularly large barrel, almost as tall as the inspector himself, stood in a corner a little apart from the others. Twice the inspector's knuckles explored its convex wooden belly from top to bottom, getting for response only a continuous series of hollow, ringing thumps. The barrel was empty.

The inspector's light splayed upward to illuminate the huge spider web that stretched from the top of the barrel to the low ceiling of the cellar. He pushed the glaring eye of his lamp against the web. The gossamer threads gave, but did not break. Prike put his hand behind the web, ran his fingers downward and toward him. One corner of the web pulled loose, dangling a small thumb tack.

The cobweb was made of fine silk fibres. At one corner was the almost microscopic tag, "Made in Japan."

At last his revolver gleamed in Inspector Prike's hand.

"Help me here, please." A nod of his head summoned the commissaire.

The Frenchman stepped up, tried to budge the barrel. The barrel resisted the combined efforts of his hands and Inspector Prike's shoulder. It seemed unusually heavy for an empty hogshead. Twenty fingers strained for a hold under the rusty iron hoops.

Suddenly the barrel gave way, tottered, crashed against Inspector Prike, upset.

Prike's flashlight fell, rolled along the floor. Its diffused glow revealed an opening in the wall behind the barrel. A man crouched in the opening.

The Commissaire took an involuntary step backward.

"*Nom d'un nom !*" he exclaimed. "*Tirez, Inspecteur !*"

But Inspector Prike did not shoot. He hurdled the barrel, grasped the crouching man's shoulder.

The man lurched from the opening, pitched forward against Prike, bore him to the ground.

Marvin ran down the stairs to the inspector's aid, then stopped short, aghast. The man sprawled upon Inspector Prike lay limp, motionless. The back of his drill coat was crimson, wet. The haft of a knife protruded from beneath one shoulder.

Inspector Prike writhed free from under the inert body. He got to his knees, gently turned the man over on his side.

Marvin picked up the flashlight from the floor, shone it into the man's face. Despite the closed eyes and its ghastly pallor, the face was somehow twisted into a grim expression of cynical glee.

It was the face of Rufus Dormer.

CHAPTER XXIV

"*Nom d'un nom !*" exclaimed the commissaire. "*Il est mort !*"

"Dormer !" Robbins helped Prike lift the bloody form. "How the hell did——? Did Jacques Vrai——?"

"Or Kobayashi," murmured Prike. "Or——" He looked up. Lee Marvin, George Linnet and Chitterji Rao were standing on the stone stairway to the cellar, watching with wondering eyes.

"Monsieur le Commissaire," Prike resumed, "will you send more men to watch the boundaries of Chandernagore, to guard the roads, the *ghats*——?"

"Certainly. But where does this man come from? Where does this tunnel——?"

"Now !" concluded Prike.

"Certainly." The commissaire ran up the stairs, shouting orders in French.

Prike and Robbins followed, carrying Rufus Dormer between them. They stretched him on a table in the bar.

Robbins looked accusingly at Marvin.

"Every time this chap Marvin pops up," he said, "we find another corpse."

"Not this time, Robbins." Prike noted that blood was still oozing rhythmically from Dormer's wound. Quickly his deft fingers sought the journalist's pulse, found it flickering feebly. He glanced at the knife in Dormer's back, carefully removed it.

"Still alive," he announced. "Blade was deflected by his scapula. Went in diagonally."

"Then we can save his life, perhaps," purred Chitterji

Rao, over Prike's shoulder. "The Maharajah's speed boat is at your disposal."

"My car's faster," said Prike. "Robbins?"

"Yes, inspector."

Prike spoke to his subordinate without looking at him. He was busy inspecting the knife he had taken from Dormer's back. Stamped into the blade near the hilt were two small letters, "E.B."

"Robbins, this man's in bad shape. Take him to Calcutta in my car as quickly as possible. Stay with him at the hospital, and if he recovers consciousness——"

"Ask him who knifed him? I'll do that."

"He won't tell you, Robbins. As soon as he recovers consciousness, send for me."

"Right, inspector."

"And don't lose him, Robbins—like you did Kobayashi."

"Right, inspector. I mean—no, inspector."

When Robbins was on his way south with the unconscious Dormer, Chitterji Rao said to Inspector Prike:

"Since you don't need us, we will go on."

"I would suggest," the inspector replied, "that you return to Calcutta. The Maharajah's *nao-ratna* is likely to turn up there to-night."

"His Highness is no longer interested."

"Granted. I am quite ready to believe—at least for the sake of courtesy—that your arrival in Chander-nagore is pure coincidence. It is entirely possible that you did not know that the *nao-ratna* was taken from Mr. Marvin's apartment yesterday by Jacques Vrai. Nevertheless, with the Diwali Festival starting to-night——"

"You asked me last night, inspector, to prepare a written memorandum to the effect that His Highness

has already recovered the *nao-ratna* containing the Bosa pearl, and therefore gratefully dispenses with all police investigation. I sent such a memorandum to your office this morning."

"Thank you," said Prike. "In that case, my intervention is quite gratuitous. As a matter of fact, I am not sure where the *nao-ratna* is at this moment. I do think, however, that to-night, at about——" Inspector Prike walked to the wall to study the sheaf of sailing announcements from shipping companies posted there. His thumb flicked over the sheets. S.S. *Bicki-Maru* for Yokohama via ports; 10 p.m.—S.S. *Alfonse Daudet*, for Pondichery and Saigon; 11 p.m.—S.S. *Kut Mai* for S'pore and Bangkok, midnight. . . . "I should say that the *nao-ratna*, despite its recovery, will make an appearance shortly before midnight to-night. Will you return to Calcutta, gentlemen, so that I may reach you at the Alipore Palace at my convenience?"

"Say, what about my tiger hunt?" George Linnet protested.

"Tiger hunting will not be at its best for another month at least," said Prike. "You've come a little early, Linnet. I'm surprised that Chitterji Rao would let you go into the *mofussil* so soon after the rains. . . ."

"Do you mean to imply——?"

"Nothing. I am merely suggesting—that you return to Calcutta." Prike's voice was quiet, even soft, but his eyes were hard.

"Very well." Chitterji Rao bowed, but not submissively. "We shall return at once."

"You will wait," Prike replied, "until I ask the French authorities to reopen the frontiers of the town. In the meantime, if you would like to accompany me on a little underground exploring expedition. I'm sure I can find something that will amuse you. . . ."

"Thank you. We will stop on here."

Prike nodded. Without another word he returned to the cellar.

The inspector's flashlight found the opening in the wall back of the wine casks, where apparently Dormer had been stabbed. The beam of light bored seventy or eighty feet back from the opening. Prike stepped into the mouth of the tunnel.

There was not room enough in the tunnel for a man to stand upright, and Prike was bent nearly double as he crept forward. He scanned the ground for some indication as to whether Dormer had been stabbed in the tunnel, or had crept in with the knife already in his back, and had lost consciousness trying to move the barrel away from the entrance. It was futile; the water seeping in from the walls of the tunnel covered the floor with slime that was too liquid to retain any sort of impression. The slush was alive with some sort of amphibian insects that squirmed out from underfoot and scuttled up the walls. Soft, wet earth showered down on the inspector's shoulders whenever his head brushed the crumbly ceiling. . . .

Prike followed the low tunnel for about thirty yards in what seemed to be a southerly direction from the hotel wine cellar. Then the tunnel shot off diagonally to the left, continued for twenty paces, and ended abruptly at a muddy wooden ladder. At the foot of the ladder Prike swung his light upward, saw a square of unpainted wood a dozen feet above him. He climbed the ladder, pushed aside the wooden square—which proved to be the bottom of an empty packing case—and stepped out on the floor of an immense godown.

There were no windows in the warehouse, but a long line of ventilators under the eaves let a diffused twilight into the vast interior. Prike snapped out his

flashlamp. All about, piled almost to the ceiling, were stacks and pyramids of boxes and packing cases. On the floor were two sets of muddy footprints—one, leading toward the ladder to the tunnel, was outlined in the yellowish silt of the river—Rufus Dormer's feet ; the other set, less distinct as they led away from the ladder, were marked by smears of brown mud from the floor of the tunnel—in all probability Jacques Vrai's footprints. Here and there Prike thought he saw indications of a third set of prints, made by some one who had carefully walked in the tracks made by Vrai, but the marks were so faint that Prike thought they might be the result of his imagination. At any rate, they were so well concealed that attempts at identification would be useless. He followed the outgoing prints as far as the door, noted that the door had been left open, looked out casually, came back.

Then he stalked between towering aisles of packing cases, noting without surprise that they were stencilled with Japanese ideographs and occasionally with the English legend : " Osaka Cotton Spinners' Mutual Export Association." He was a trifle puzzled, however, by the odours permeating the godown, odours more characteristic of an armoury than a warehouse for cotton goods : The greasy smell of cosmoline and of whale oil. That he had discovered the cache in which the late Harrison Hoyt had been storing the Japanese arms he had been smuggling into India in the guise of cotton goods, was no surprise to Prike ; he had expected that, sooner or later. But the evidence that came to his nose that this huge contraband armoury was being taken care of, constantly protected against the humidity of a tropical climate, so that its contents would be ready for use at a moment's notice, was news to Prike. He prowled about the godown until he found a tool

kit. Then he set about opening some of the cases. . . .

During the next half-hour Inspector Prike congratulated himself that he had probably saved the Indian Army from a second Sepoy Rebellion. The few cases he opened indicated that the godown contained thousands of machine guns, more thousands of automatic rifles, and probably millions of rounds of ammunition. He had no definite idea how these arms and munitions were to be distributed, but he was certain that they were destined in some way for use against the British. And he would arrest Harrison Hoyt's accomplices to-night. . . .

As he continued to prowl, Inspector Prike made two more discoveries which intrigued him greatly. One was a trail of small muddy semi-circles on the floor—like the prints of a woman's high-heeled shoes. The other was a huge box containing gross after gross of brass belt buckles, embossed with Hindi characters which read, "AKBAR II." He smiled to himself with satisfaction. More missing pieces were fitting into his puzzle. . . .

"Ah, Monsieur l'Inspecteur, vous voilà !"

The perspiring, mustachioed face of the Commissaire de Police emerged from the trap-door behind Prike, who was prying the lid off another case of automatic rifles. Prike turned.

"I was about to send for you, *mon cher collègue*," he said, "I seem to have discovered a violation of the Anglo-French agreement of 1815."

With a casual gesture, Prike indicated the array of deadly weapons.

"Nom d'un nom !" exclaimed the commissaire.

"But before we go into matters of international politics," Prike continued, "I should like to determine a question of acoustics, with your help. I want one of

your men to go down into the tunnel from this end. I want him to crawl slowly toward the wine cellar, calling out every few feet or so. You and I will go back to the bar of the Hotel Dupleix and listen. I am interested to know at just what point his cries will become audible."

"*Comme vous voulez, Monsieur l'Inspecteur,*" said the commissaire.

CHAPTER XXV

THE grey-green eyes of Evelyn Branch were making a critical survey of the room to which Antoinette Vrai had brought her. Judging from their expression, they disapproved of the litter of hairpins, spilled powder, and crumpled towels on the marble-topped washstand of the cracked porcelain bowl half full of grey soapy water, of the grimy mosquito netting, of the mangy rug on the crazy-china floor. Her nose wrinkled at the reek of musk.

Evelyn had a violent loathing to being in Antoinette's room, yet she had come there deliberately. She had no intention of wearing anything that belonged to Antoinette Vrai. The mere idea revolted her. True, she had been curious to see Antoinette, even anxious to know the sort of woman who had won Harrison Hoyt away from her. But the first sight of Antoinette had convinced her that her interest in the woman had been purely academic. She had no further desire to probe into her hold over Harry Hoyt. Even as a name, Antoinette had been distasteful to Evelyn ; as a person she was odious.

" Here," said Antoinette, throwing open the mirrored door of a tall, mahogany *armoire à glace*. " Take."

She ran her scarlet-tipped fingers along a row of dresses.

Evelyn nodded, but made no move to select a gown. Rufus Dormer, during the trip up the river on the *bunder* boat, had told her she should somehow get into Antoinette's room. Antoinette, he had said, would probably have the *nao-ratna*, and she was the sort of person who hid things under mattresses, behind

clocks, and in sugar bowls. Rufus Dormer appeared to have a surprising knowledge of people and things. He was probably right about the *nao-ratna* being in Chandernagore. Something unusual was certainly happening here, to account for the presence of Inspector Prike, George Linnet and Chitterji Roa. . . .

"Take a nice one, *ma chère*," said Antoinette. "You must be pretty for Carrot-top."

"Who's that?"

"Carrot-top. Lee Marvin. You like him, no?"

"I haven't thought about it."

"He likes you. He looks at you with goat eyes."

"Let him look," said Evelyn. She turned her back on Antoinette and took a white poplin dress from a hanger. As she closed the *armoire*, she saw Antoinette's reflection in the mirrored door. Antoinette had slipped something from under the marble top of the washstand, and was bending over. Evelyn heard the rustle of silk, caught a glimpse of black lace underwear beneath the up-gathered green dress.

In a small looking glass above the washstand, Antoinette saw the double reflection of Evelyn staring at her in the *armoire* mirror. She straightened up, smoothed down her skirts, spun around.

"What are you looking at?" she demanded.

"Nothing." Evelyn wondered what Antoinette was hiding. It was something she had taken from under the marble top—too flat for a necklace.

"So." Antoinette approached, her eyes clouded with a distant look of sullen, smoking menace. Her lips were drawn tight against her unevenly-spaced teeth. "So you are here *pour moucharder*! You are of the police, too—to spy on me."

Antoinette continued to approach. Evelyn took a hitch in her own temper, stepped back.

"Nonsense," she said.

"Then why do you stand there like in the wax-works? Why don't you move? Are you going to change your dress? Yes or no?"

"Thank you so much," said Evelyn, trying to keep her voice steady. "My own dress is nearly dry now."

"Then get out!" Antoinette snatched the white dress from the other girl's hands. "Get out!"

Mustering all her dignity, Evelyn walked from the room to the verandah which extended along the side of the hotel. Behind her the door slammed. She stopped in her tracks. In front of her Lee Marvin was leaning against a post, his arms folded. For an instant she almost regretted not having borrowed a dress. . . .

"Do you listen at keyholes, too?" she asked.

"My ears are too big," said Marvin, without unfolding his arms. "I was waiting for you to come out. I have a good many questions to ask you, and I wanted to get to you before Linnet."

"Why Linnet?"

"Well, we're all more or less marooned here in these three square miles of French territory until Inspector Prike decides to reopen the border. . . ."

"I repeat—why Linnet?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've decided not to like Colonel Linnet, and I'm afraid you do."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you called on him last night, at the Maharajah of Jharnpur's Alipore Palace."

"Who told you that?"

"No one. I saw the invitation on your night-table."

"You mean—at Mrs. Pereira's—?"

"Yes," said Marvin. "You may as well know that I've compromised you thoroughly. I slept in your room last night—or rather this morning."

"You——?" The girl looked searchingly into

Marvin's placid blue eyes. "Lee Marvin, do I have to start getting suspicious of you all over again?"

"There's plenty of suspicion floating around here," said Marvin gravely, "and there may be a little left for you; but most of it's mine. You've got a lot of explaining to do. Your little playmate Rufus Dormer has just been stabbed."

"Stabbed—killed?"

"Very badly wounded. They've taken him to Calcutta."

"Is he . . .? Who did it?" The girl swallowed.

"The same person, I imagine, who killed Hoyt."

"Then Dormer didn't—? But he practically admitted he killed Harry. . . . He hated him. . . ."

Evelyn was very pale. Marvin wished again she didn't look quite so feminine, quite so desirable. He had come to Chandernagore strictly on business—and the girl looked as though she were going to faint.

"Let's sit down." Marvin took Evelyn's arm and pointed off the verandah to a bench under a peepul tree. Next to the bench was a rudely-carved stone image, splashed with vermilion, of a fat deity with the head of an elephant. "That's Ganesh over there, the god of wisdom—and good luck. Shall we sit by him?"

"Let's," said Evelyn. "Maybe I should rub his forehead."

"First you might tell me why you went to the Alipore Palace at two in the morning," said Marvin. They sat down.

"I had business there." Evelyn was much occupied with the damp folds of her dress. She was composed again—harder. Marvin was relieved.

"All night? What kind of business——?"

"None of yours," said Evelyn sharply.

"Fine!" Marvin declared. "I was sure I knew why

you sent me that note—just to see if I'd come twenty miles at the merest word from you ! ”

“ Of course I didn't ! ” Evelyn's eyes softened. She smiled a little wistfully. She reached over to lay a slender, tapering finger on Marvin's damp, pungee sleeve. “ I sent you that note because I'd come to the conclusion that I could trust my instincts again—and that I could trust you. And I wanted to tell you—— ” She paused.

“ What ? ”

“ Well, I've been looking back on these last mad days, and I realised I must have given you the impression that I'm just a crazy adventuress. I want to correct that impression, if it's not too late.”

“ I'm reserving judgment. . . . ”

“ Oh, I admit I've always been fascinated by the idea of excitement in the abstract, but the things I've done since Thursday—my going to Alipore in the middle of the night, for instance—are all a matter of economics. You see, Lee Marvin, when I was seventeen I ran away from a dull and orphaned childhood in North Platte, Nebraska. I ran away to New York, because I wanted to make my own living, because I was bored with corn fields, and because I was fed up with the over-kind ministrations of my distant—and only—relatives. Since I have turned over practically all my savings to steamship and railway companies in return for transportation to India, I am, to put it frankly, stony broke. I certainly can't ask money from my distant relatives ; for years they've considered me worse than dead, because any girl who travels alone to New York, to say nothing of India, can no longer expect to find favour in the eyes of God and decent Nebraskans. So there really isn't anything surprising in my getting up in the middle of the night, when I have a chance to recoup my fortunes. . . . ”

"Who offered you this chance? Linnet?"

"No. A Mr. Chitterji Rao, on behalf of of the Maharajah of Jharnpur, offered me fifteen thousand rupees to get back that ceremonial necklace—from you."

Marvin frowned. "This would make a lot more sense," he said, "if I didn't happen to know that you aren't at all penniless. Harrison Hoyt's insurance policies are still in your name."

Evelyn shook her head. "I couldn't touch that money," she said.

"Why not?"

The girl drew a deep breath. "You asked me last night," she replied, "why I insisted on sailing for India, after Harry Hoyt cabled me not to come. I didn't tell you last night, but I will now. You see, Harry had a sister, Charlotte, who adored him—and thought the world of me. She was terribly happy to think that Harry and I were getting married, and it worried her when a year and a half went by without Harry sending for me. She wrote Harry, and he answered that it was taking him longer than he expected to get established, because he was short of capital. Well, Charlotte had a few thousand dollars' worth of bonds—not much, but it represented a lot to a middle-aged school teacher who'd been scraping and saving for years on a school-teacher's pitiful salary. She sold the bonds and sent Harry the money. Harry sent back a newspaper clipping about the Maharajah of Jharnpur and the Bosa pearl. Charlotte now owned an interest in the pearl, he wrote, which the Maharajah had commissioned him to resell for a fabulous price. Several months passed. Then Harry wrote that there had been a hitch, because his deal for the pearl was being blocked by the machinations of a soulless international corporation—Orfèvre, Ltd. That's you."

"Why, the——!"

"Wait. Knowing that Harry was always terribly irresponsible with money, I thought perhaps, if I joined him, I might be the steadying influence. I wrote him I was coming. When he cabled me not to, I thought he was just trying to spare me financial discouragement. And that made me even more determined to come out and help. . . . For his sake, and Charlotte's. So I want the insurance money to go to Charlotte. Am I so terribly wrong?"

Marvin didn't answer. The proud blonde head wasn't proud now; it was leaning toward him almost imperceptibly. The trusting lips, even more trusting, were parted expectantly, a little fearfully, perhaps. The big eyes, at once wise and child-like, were pleading with him. Then suddenly they became points of light in the warm blur that was her face. Marvin wasn't seeing very clearly. All his senses seemed subordinated to an abrupt and overwhelming realisation that he wanted to kiss Evelyn Branch, that he would have to kiss her because he had never wanted anything so much in all his life. He could already imagine his arms around her, holding her tightly, so tightly, so closely, that she was a living, vibrant part of himself. But he was not going to kiss her—now. He needed to think clearly, and his rational brain, at this moment, wavered on the brink of abdication. He stood up quickly.

"How do I know this is the truth?" he asked at last. "How do I know you aren't staging a little performance for my especial benefit?"

"Do I look like an actress? I've explained, haven't I, why I've been suspicious of you until now? Blame Harry Hoyt. . . ."

"There are still some things you haven't explained," said Marvin. "Why, for instance, did you throw one

of Kurt Julius's buttons at me when you left my flat last night ? ”

“ You mean that lump of silver carved like a tiger's head ? ”

“ Yes. Why did you throw it at me ? ”

“ That,” said Evelyn lightly, “ is a matter of heredity.”

“ Heredity ? ”

“ Yes. My father had an awful temper. I'm afflicted congenitally. When you started talking to me like a district attorney, I had an attack.”

“ So you deliberately wanted to see me hanged ? ”

“ Hanged ? ”

“ You knew the button belonged to Julius, didn't you ? ”

“ I'd heard so, yes.”

“ Then you must have known that I'd try to discover the connection between your visit and that button, that I'd go out to find Julius and arrive just in time to stumble over his corpse—and be accused of murder.”

“ No ! ” Evelyn paled. She half arose from the bench. “ I—I didn't know Julius was dead. How could I ? I never saw the man. I didn't think——. Oh, I'm sorry.” The girl's full lips curved into a plea for forgiveness.

“ Where did you get the silver button ? ” Marvin pursued.

“ Why, I thought you left it in my room. That's why I brought it back to you. I thought you were trying to make trouble for me because I wouldn't—well, give you a tumble.”

“ Why did you think *I* left it there ? ”

“ It must have been you—or Harry Hoyt. I found it on the floor. . . . ”

“ And how did you know it belonged to Julius ? ” Marvin sat down again.

"Colonel Linnet told me."

"I see." Marvin offered the girl a cigarette. She shook her head. Her grey-green eyes watched every change in his expression.

"Did Linnet tell you to bring the button to my flat?" Marvin resumed.

"No. He said I'd better go to the police with it. Julius was certainly mixed up with Harry Hoyt, he said, and the button might be embarrassing to me if Prike found it. He advised me to go right to Prike and tell the whole story. . . ."

"Is Linnet in love with you?"

"George Linnet?" The girl laughed. "I'd hardly call it love."

"Has he been making passes at you—on the steamer, for instance?"

"Oh, he made love to me on the *Bangalore*, of course. Isn't that a regular part of a sea voyage—like bouillon on deck at eleven, and shuffleboard."

"He kissed you?"

"He did his best. There was a moon in the Bay of Bengal. . . . I'm sure he's forgotten about it already."

"Have you?"

"Completely."

"How did you happen to collide in the river this morning. By prearrangement?"

"I'm sure I don't know what Rufus Dormer arranged."

"And that's another thing: What were you doing with Dormer, anyhow?"

Briefly Evelyn told him of her encounter with Dormer at Alipore, her brief imprisonment in his room, the expedition in search of the *nao-ratna*.

"He thinks Jacques Vrai is the man who stole the Bosa pearl from you," she concluded.

"So does Inspector Prike," said Marvin. "And

apparently Vrai has gone back to Calcutta with it. I wonder. . . . Where does Dormer live ? ”

“ I wish I knew. My passport is locked up in his place. I suppose I’ll have to get the police to find it for me.”

“ The police would like very much to know Dormer’s address. He moved yesterday. Couldn’t you locate the place, approximately . . . ? ”

“ It’s in the back of some sort of outdoor gambling dive,” said Evelyn. She described the scene she had watched that morning, and tried to tell the route by which Dormer had driven her there.

“ That,” said Marvin when she had finished, “ sounds very much like Lal Gupta’s rain game, near the Marwari bazaar. . . . Pardon me just a moment.”

He got up and walked rapidly toward the hotel. Evelyn started after him. As he reached the verandah she caught his sleeve.

“ Where are you going ? ” she demanded.

“ That’s not a polite question for a lady to ask a gentleman, or vice versa. . . . ”

“ I know where.”

“ Do you ? Then don’t ask.”

“ You’re after Inspector Prike’s permission to leave Chandernagore.”

“ Well ? ”

“ You’re going to look for Dormer’s room. You’ve decided that Dormer and Jacques Vrai might have been partners in crime, since Dormer is so well informed. You’re going to Dormer’s on a chance that Vrai might be there—with the Bosa pearl.”

“ Well ? ”

“ I’m going with you.” She still clung to his sleeve.

“ No, you’re not.”

“ I’ve got to get my passport.”

“ I’ll bring you your passport. I’ll give it to you

at dinner to-morrow. You'll have dinner with me, won't you. Or shall we make it tiffin ? "

" I'm going with you," Evelyn repeated. " Now."

" No—for two reasons. First, it's dangerous ; Jacques Vrai is likely to prove a tough customer. Second, I don't want any more interference——"

" All right," Evelyn announced. " Then I'll tell Inspector Prike where Dormer lives. That'll settle everything."

Marvin looked solemn for several seconds. Then he smiled in capitulation.

" Have it your own way," he said. " We'll both go—for your passport."

CHAPTER XXVI

It was late afternoon before a taxi bearing Lee Marvin and Evelyn Branch drew up in front of Lal Gupta's rain game.

There had been considerable delay about leaving Chandernagore. Inspector Prike was in a surprisingly calm and leisurely mood for a man who had during the course of the morning uncovered an important cache of smuggled arms, had two murder suspects disappear, and a third one stabbed. The inspector insisted on remaining at the Hotel Duplex for tiffin—to essay Antoinette Vrai's vaunted cuisine, he said, although Marvin noted he gave much more attention to observing covertly the mutual reactions of the motley guests he had gathered about the table.

After tiffin, Prike left the local situation in the hands of the French authorities, having received their consent to take Antoinette Vrai to Calcutta with him as a reluctant witness. The inspector and Antoinette left in the Maharajah of Jharnpur's speed boat with Linnet and Chitterji Rao. Marvin and Evelyn Branch took the train at the East Indian Railway station just outside the French frontier. They found a taxi at the Howrah terminal, crossed the pontoon bridge to Calcutta, and proceeded directly to the gambling establishment near the Marwari bazaar.

"This looks like the place," Evelyn said, "although I couldn't be sure unless we went in. I'd recognise the courtyard, with the little window in back from Dormer's room. . . ."

"No chance of getting in, I'm afraid," Marvin said. "They'd think I was from the police. Gambling

is illegal in Calcutta—except at the British clubs and racecourses. Let's go around to the street in back. . . ."

The taxi made the circuit of the square, going very slowly. When they turned the second corner, Evelyn saw the narrow, smelly alley between mud walls, with the wooden door at the end.

"That's it!"

"*Roko!*" ordered Marvin.

The taxi stopped. The pair got out, traversed the passageway. Marvin tried the door. It was locked. He listened for several minutes, but heard no sound inside. He turned to Evelyn.

"You haven't a hairpin, of course."

"Of course not."

Marvin went to work with a jackknife.

"You are about to witness," he said, "the triumph of modern science over modern womanhood."

It did not take him long to force the cheap lock. The door creaked as it swung inward. Marvin entered cautiously, looked about the bare room, peered under the crude cot.

Evelyn laughed behind him. "Are you looking for Jacques Vrai?" she demanded.

"No. I'm still looking for trouble."

"Don't be whimsical," said Evelyn.

Marvin dragged the battered pasteboard suitcase from under the bed.

"Is this where Dormer hid your passport?" he asked.

"Yes."

Marvin sprung the lock on the suitcase, knelt beside it. Evelyn bent over his shoulder. Marvin picked a little red booklet from a pile of clothing, handed it to the girl.

"Here's your passport," he said. "Now you can go."

"Wait. What's that? What's that shining in there?"

Marvin's fingers delved gingerly into the mass of frayed shirts, tattered socks, much-mended underwear and touched something cool and smooth. He drew out a long, flat box of japanned metal.

Evelyn chuckled triumphantly.

The metal box was not fastened. Marvin pried back the lid. An odour of old paper arose from the littered interior.

Marvin lifted out a London theatre programme, dated June, 1923. Something slipped from between the pages and fell at his feet. Evelyn reached for it—a dried, pressed rose whose brittle brown petals crumbled as she touched them.

Marvin dug farther into the box and brought out a lock of hair—a hazel-brown curl tied with a narrow bow of baby blue; a dozen faded photographs, all of the same young woman, pretty in a coquettish way, dressed and coiffed in the style of the years following the war; several snapshots, one of the same woman standing in a garden, holding a very small baby, one of a toddling child of two or three, labelled in ink, "Elizabeth Ann, 1926."

"Let me see that," said Evelyn Branch, holding out her hand.

"It looks to me," commented Marvin, "as if some rank sentimentalist has had the bad luck to fall into Dormer's clutches. Wonder if the blackmail has already——"

"What's that?" interrupted Evelyn, reaching her own fingers into the metal box, and taking out a yellowed newspaper cutting.

"I'll be damned!" Marvin exclaimed.

The newspaper article was from the May 1, 1927, issue of the *News of the Globe*, London weekly of sex and sensation. It read:

"Rufus Dormer, perhaps the most brilliant and talented of the professional scandal-mongers on the staff of our contemporary, *Eavesdropper*, finds himself on the wrong side of the keyhole to-day.

"For the past few years Dormer's prodigious nose for news of an intimate character, together with the barbed wit of his pen, has caused considerable uneasiness among those of high station and low instincts. To-day he is an actor in one of those sordid dramas at which he was so long an amused and amusing spectator.

"Dormer is in hospital to-day—the result of having tried to kill himself last night by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets.

"His suicidal intent was indicated in a note found by police, giving instructions for the care of his four-year-old daughter. He was heart-broken because his wife, formerly known as Violet Lane, the music-hall dancer, ran away with another man.

"The third angle of the triangle is understood to be a prominent impresario whose own domestic troubles last year furnished Dormer with much clever and jocular copy.

"Dormer will recover."

"He didn't, though—quite," mused Marvin.

Evelyn did not comment. She was undoing a packet of letters which had been neatly tied with loving care. The letters were written in the round, uneven scrawl of a child. "Dear daddy, I am fine, how are you? It is raining here. . . ." one began. And: "Dear daddy, thank you for the dolly it is butifull. . . ."

Marvin tried to close the box. "Let's not read any more," he said. "I hate being the Peeping Tom on a man's naked soul, even the soft and sentimental soul of a cynic."

"I've got to find out everything," Evelyn insisted. She refused to remove her fingers from the rim of the box. "What's this?"

She pulled out another handful of letters. These proved both mature and matter-of-fact. They were from a woman in Surrey, who from the context, had been taking care of Elizabeth Ann Dormer since her father had gone to India. The letters were all acknowledgments of money representing most of Dormer's meagre salary, that Dormer had been sending to England for the child's subsistence. They faithfully reported the progress of the girl's education, recorded her minor ailments, told of her growth. The last one in the packet, dated the previous month, read :

"Dear Mr. Dormer : You always used to say that when Elizabeth Ann was grown up enough, you wanted her to go to a better school than there is in this village. If you could see her, I think you would say she is grown up now, Mr. Dormer, so I have been looking out for new schools. I have found a very nice one, not too dear and close enough so she could come home to me week-ends. I know you have been sending me all the money you can, but we will have to have a little more, if you want Elizabeth Ann to go to this school. She will need a few dresses, over and above those I will sew for her. For the half-year. I think £35——"

"Thirty-five pounds," said Marvin aloud, "amounts to about 500 rupees. . . . So that——" He paused. He replaced the letters gently. There was a carefully-folded piece of silk in the box, a faded square that looked remarkably like a Union Jack. The muscles of his throat contracted as he closed the suitcase on the handful of yellowing papers, shutting up the musty smell, just as Dormer had for years shut up his loyalty

and devotion beneath a savage pretence of misanthropy and hate for a land which held such painful memories.

Marvin arose. Evelyn was standing very near him, looking at him with eyes that were unusually bright. Suddenly, without his knowing exactly how it happened, she was in his arms and he was kissing her. Dormer, Vrai, the Bosa pearl—nothing mattered then, nothing except that her hands had crept behind his shoulders, that she was clinging to him with honest abandon, that his lips were pressing fervent kisses upon hers, upon her hair, her trembling eyelids. . . .

It was a long minute before he found the breath to say :

"I told you it was dangerous to come here."

The girl leaned back in his embrace. She touched his tanned cheeks with her fingertips.

"I wanted to come, didn't I?" she said.

"But I could have sworn, when I met you on the dock, that you were still in love with Hoyt."

"I was—in a way. But the Harry Hoyt I loved was a creature of my own imagination. I didn't know until I could compare him with the real Hoyt Thursday night, with a perspective of two years' separation, that he didn't really exist. I'm grateful to Harry for having come to see me before—before he died."

"So am I. Dead men are such damned unfair rivals."

He kissed her again. He could have gone on kissing her indefinitely, had it not been for an interruption.

An impatient hand was knocking at the door.

Marvin's head went up, startled. Still holding the girl close, he called in a husky voice, "*Kaun hai?*"

"*Main ek tar Dormer K'wasti laya hun,*" came the reply through the door panel.

Marvin unwound his arms. There was a frightened query in the girl's eyes. "What is it," she whispered.

"Telegram for Dormer."

"Better take it."

Marvin opened the door a crack. A post office *chaprassi*, leaning against his bicycle outside, handed him a salmon-coloured envelope. He took it, closed the door, ripped open the envelope.

His eyes narrowed as he read the message :

ALL IS LOST MISTER DORMER KINDLY AND URGENTLY
SEE ME AT PROMPTTEST OPPORTUNITY

GUNDRANESH DUTT

CHAPTER XXVII

THE Hindu festival of Diwali, the feast of lights, is said to commemorate the day, many thousands of years ago, when the gods were on more intimate terms with mortals, that Vishnu the Preserver killed a giant and was greeted, on his return at nightfall, by women bearing lamps. Whatever its origin, its celebration in modern Bengal on the first of Kartik resembles a composite of Guy Fawkes' Day, the Fourth of July, and the Quatorze Juillet. Bearded old men join with naked brown youngsters in setting off squibs and mines in crude earthenware spheres. Housefronts are outlined in oil lamps, and Bengal fire burns from housetops in blue and green and red flares. If a man is poor, he shoots fireworks in honour of Kali, and if he is rich, he prepares a glittering display of lights and pyrotechnics to dazzle Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. If he is important, with important projects to stake, he makes tiny earthenware boats, sets them afloat in some river, all ablaze with Bengal fire, and watches if they remain alight or sputter out—in order to know if his past favours to his particular goddess will entitle him to success in his next great undertaking. And if a man is neither rich nor poor nor important, but only a modest clerk like Babu Bundranesh Dutt, he shoots off his squibs and burns his Bengal fire just for the fun of the thing.

Gundranesh Dutt, despite his efforts to appear completely westernised during office hours, took a juvenile delight in the celebration—at home—of those Hindu festivals with definite physical aspects. And Diwali was one of his favourites.

This particular Dinwali promised to be an unusual delight for the Babu because Cousin Danilal Dutt of Barrackpore had come down to help celebrate. Cousin Danilal owned a shop near the cantonment, and in addition to being a person of some means, was a great fellow. He was as small and wiry as Cousin Gundranesh was rotund, his bulging forehead was almost as broad as his shoulders, and his steel-rimmed spectacles gave him an ascetic, Ghandi-like mien. But Cousin Danilal was not in the least severe. No one loved fun more than he, and when he came to Calcutta for Diwali he brought plenty of fireworks from his shop in Barrackpore.

The arrival of Cousin Danilal on Friday night had been somewhat marred by the excitement following the death of the Babu's employer, the murder of Kurt Julius, and the subsequent detention of Gundranesh Dutt by the police in circumstances which seemed tantamount to accusation of murder and certain disgrace. However, a few hours' sleep and the dawn of Saturday with its promise of a gay Diwali, almost eradicated yesterday's unpleasantness from the Babu's mind. Not even the prospect of deportation to the Andamans for life could spoil a good Diwali.

Babu Gundranesh Dutt and Cousin Danilal were seated upon a padded quilt, having their tiffin in the tiny compound of the Babu's mud-and-bamboo home. They were talking English—solely to impress the Babu's twenty-year-old wife, who, having finished serving the rice, *dahl*, and curried *alu*, had left the men to their *ghi* soaked sweetmeats and returned to her four children in the women's quarters. The Babu was cutting areca nut for the after-tiffin *pan*-chewing, when he was interrupted by the arrival of the postman.

"Postman?" said the Babu, to his wife's announce-

ment. "Am expecting nothing by post. At present am without private correspondents."

"Perhaps former employers are seeking re-engagement of services for West Bank Jute Mills," said Cousin Danilal.

Gundranesh Dutt shook his head and got up. He returned a moment later with a small oblong package.

"Address is unmistakable," he said, puzzled, "yet am at loss to account for whole dam' business. . . ."

Cousin Danilal took the package from his hands. "Imprint indicates same was deposited in Calcutta General Post Office yesterday," he announced.

"Perhaps contents will offer further clue."

"Perhaps," the Babu agreed. He undid the wrapping. Inside was further wrapping, but folded about the inner parcel was a loose sheet of paper on which was a pencil-written note in crudely printed block letters :

"Do not open this. Tell nobody. Telling police means death. Bring packet to Lower Circular Road graveyard at ten o'clock Saturday night. Walk inside until somebody takes package from you. Come alone—or you follow Hoyt."

There was no signature.

"Chit seems quite clear, though anonymous," commented Cousin Danilal, reading over the Babu's shoulder. "Proposed meeting is scheduled for to-night."

Gundranesh Dutt began to perspire. Half a dozen rivulets trickled down between his chins. His eyes bulged, as his sausage-like thumbs gave the parcel a few nervous, exploratory squeezes.

"Fingers are distinguishing nine distinct lumps within," he declared in a quavering voice. "Am greatly fearing that package enfolds missing *nao-ratna*

of H.H. the Maharajah of Jharnpur. What to do, Cousin Danilal? Why is said criminal object sent to self?"

Cousin Danilal looked very grave as he smeared lime on the heart-shaped leaf of a betel creeper, sprinkled it with areca nut, folded it into a small cornucopia, pinned it with a clove, and popped it into his mouth.

"No doubt," he said between chews, "that criminal has great faith in your honesty and good nature. He is merely leaving stolen goods in safe hands until danger of search by police is past. Why not communicate direct with police, Cousin Gundranesh?"

"But chit expressly forbids same," the Babu replied, mopping his face, "on penalty of death."

"According to *Bhagavad Gita*," said Cousin Danilal wisely, "death is not tragic or disgraceful, but merely minor step on road to infinite and self-realisation."

"True," agreed Gundranesh Dutt. "However, am personally anxious to make slight improvement in own Karma before quitting present incarnation. One dozen or more good deeds would greatly increase chances for superior social status to next rebirth."

Cousin Danilal nodded solemnly. He twisted another betel leaf into a cornucopia of *pan* and handed it to the Babu. Then he reached for his luggage, which consisted of three bulging cloth-wrapped bundles, untied one of them, and extracted a bottle of very yellow liquid.

"In that case," he said at last, "would suggest anointing scalp with latest hair oil am just now bringing from Barrackpore. Same is quite efficacious in not only promoting growth of hairs, but also penetrates through hair roots to brain, developing latent mental qualities. Brand is entitled Zabardast Maghz, and customers are uniformly pleased. Perhaps use of some will stimulate useful thoughts."

"Is action instantaneous?" asked the Babu.

"Practically," said Cousin Danilal, pulling the cork with his teeth and tendering the bottle.

The Babu cupped his hands and transferred some of the thick yellow liquid to his head. The air was pungent with the aroma of saffron, cocoanut oil, and cloves as he rubbed his scalp vigorously.

For the next five minutes the two men chewed *pan* in silence. Then Cousin Danilal asked, "Is brain feeling stimulated?"

"Somewhat," the Babu replied. "Am just now thinking that advice of European, name of Rufus Dormer, would be useful. This chap is quite smart and well versed in police matters. Also he is under slight obligations to self."

"You are acquainted with address?"

"Am discovering same yesterday while seeking reimbursement of small loan. . . ."

"Then why are you not sending him fast inland telegram asking consultation?"

"No sooner uttered than accomplished!" exclaimed Gundranesh Dutt, getting to his feet. . . .

At nightfall there was no answer from the telegram to Rufus Dormer. The Babu and Cousin Danilal were no longer worried, however. They were busy celebrating Diwali. Oil lights twinkled over the door, Bengal fire flared at intervals in the compound, and Cousin Danilal, officiously swinging the burning end of a tarred rope, set off mines and flowerpots for the edification of Mrs. Dutt and the four Dutt offspring.

At 8.45 he consulted the thick nickelled watch suspended around his neck on a string.

"Lacking response from Mister Dormer," he said to his cousin, "am suggesting you proceed immediately to graveyard with troublesome package."

"You are accompanying?"

"Part way," said Cousin Danilal. "Let us depart."

The two Hindus sauntered to the Lower Circular Road burying ground on foot, loitering to admire the glittering shop fronts of pious and prosperous merchants, stopping to lend moral support whenever they passed a particularly replete display of fireworks, watching an occasional rocket wriggle its fiery tail across the sky. Cousin Danilal carried a paper bag containing a few squibs which he fired off every quarter-hour. Even nature was celebrating Diwali, with trees all asparkle with the pulsating light of fireflies.

At the entrance to the graveyard Cousin Danilal said good-night.

"You are not coming in?" asked the Babu plaintively.

"Chit expressly said, 'Come alone,'" said Cousin Danilal.

"But chit could not possibly wish to exclude you, Cousin Danilal. You are one of family."

"Nevertheless, am under impression that closed *ghari* has been following us during part of journey. In view of threatened death penalty. . . ."

Cousin Danilal paused. The two men looked up at the warm stars. A paper fire-balloon soared overhead.

"Have also observed *ghari* following," said Gundranesh Dutt. "However, am not imputing sinister significance thereto."

He continued to regard the sky. Two more fire-balloons floated past like great, spectral glow-worms.

"Now ten o'clock p.m.," said Cousin Danilal.

"No hurry," said Gundranesh Dutt. He looked forlornly into the graveyard, where crooked lines of leaning headstones staggered into the night in swooning, ghostly ranks. Family vaults stood stolidly in the warm starlight with grim patience.

"Good-night," said Cousin Danilal. "I am wishing you luck."

"Are you remarking, Cousin Danilal," said the Babu quickly, taking the other's hand, "that such graveyards are excellent for observing queer occidental philosophy of life?"

"Am remarking only that occidentals have cumbersome customs for disposing of dead," said Cousin Danilal.

"Such elaborate structures and stone monuments," said the Babu, continuing to speak rapidly, "denote vanity of surviving relatives and great occidental uncertainty regarding immortality of soul. If soul is immortal, why must names of departed be perpetuated at great cost on carved stones? We Hindus, having great faith in Karma and doctrine of rebirth, can cremate and destroy body with great nonchalance."

"All but the navel," commented Cousin Danilal.

"The navel, of course, we preserve from flames. But that is different. The navel is the beginning of life. . . . Come, Cousin Danilal. Please accompany me." The Babu clung more tightly to his cousin's hand.

"Very well," said Cousin Danilal with a sigh.

The two men walked into the cemetery, looking neither to the right nor left. The tombstones and vaults assumed strange shapes in the darkness, and a chorus of frogs somewhere near made lugubrious, hoarse noises in the night. When they had walked for several minutes, Cousin Danilal stopped short.

"Is some one coming behind?" he asked.

"Have you looked back?"

"No. I am positive of hearing footsteps. You look."

The Babu looked. "Am seeing no one," he said.

"Odd," said Cousin Danilal. "You are still possessing package?"

"Yes."

"Then let us proceed."

They walked fifty feet farther, then stopped again. Babu Gundranesh Dutt moaned. Something dark scurried out from behind a marble slab, loped off into the thick gloom.

"Jackals," said Cousin Danilla. "Quite dismal place for rendezvous."

"Quite," the Babu agreed. "Am of opinion——"

He did not finish his sentence. He felt his arm jerked suddenly, saw Cousin Danilal crumple under a blow on the head. The lean shadow of a man had materialized behind him, swung something heavy. He turned on Gundranesh Dutt. The Babu, dodged, screamed. The lean man snatched the package from the Babu's hands, turned to run.

The Babu screamed again.

A white figure slid silently from behind a tombstone, tripped the fleeing shadow.

Another white figure arose in the darkness of the graveyard, then another.

Men were running down the cemetery aisles, shouting. The night resounded with the nearby smack of fists, grunts, curses.

A wide blade of light slashed through the darkness.

All at once the graveyard was filled with an eerie, spluttering blue glow. Cousin Danilal, having recovered consciousness, removed a little clay pot of Bengal fire from his paper bag, lit it. . . .

By the lurid light Gundranesh Dutt saw Inspector Prike snapping handcuffs about the wrists of Jacques Vrai.

He saw two European constables and several red-turbaned *pshare-wallas* crowding in from the rear. And at one side he saw with astonishment Lee Marvin

and Miss Branch. How had all these people assembled in the cemetery ?

"I didn't expect to see you for another hour, Vrai," Prike was saying to his manacled prisoner, "when the *Alfonse Daudet* sails from the Kidderpore docks at the end of this road." He went through Vrai's pockets. "Well, where is it ?"

"What ?" growled Vrai.

"The *nao-ratna*."

"You're crazy," mumbled Vrai sullenly. "You can see I don't have it."

Marvin and Evelyn Branch exchanged glances.

"If you are referring to small package recently grasped by Mr. Vrai," volunteered Babu Gundranesh Dutt, "am under impression that he dropped same when tripped."

"Who tripped him ?" Prike demanded. "You, Marvin ?"

"I'm not sure exactly what happened," Marvin replied, "with all the confusion, and the darkness. . . ."

Prike nodded to one of his constables.

"You stay here, Smith," he said. "Make a thorough search of the ground for a radius of ten or fifteen yards. Then come to my rooms. The rest of you will come with me now."

The blue light spluttered out. A match flared. A loud detonation shook the night.

Inspector Prike's flashlight revealed the startled, powder-blackened face of Cousin Danilal Dutt.

"No cause for alarm," explain Cousin Danilal sheepishly. "Am deeply regretful, but mistook small Diwali bomb for Bengal light."

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN Inspector Prike locked the handcuffs about the wrists of Jacques Vrai in the Lower Circular Road cemetery, the mystery of the murder of Harrison Hoyt was as good as solved. In fact, Prike was sure of his solution after his return from Chandernagore, and the conferences, telephone conversations, and telegrams which filled the late afternoon and early evening were merely for the purpose of verification.

Deputy Inspector Robbins was the first conferee.

"I've come from the hospital," said Robbins. "Dormer is coming around all right, but the doctor won't let me speak to him until late to-night. Did the French police find Henry Kobayashi?"

"Not yet," said Prike.

"Then I'm going back to Chandernagore," Robbins announced. "I'll find him."

"Good," said Prike. "Bring him to my rooms by midnight. If I'm not there, wait, I may be detained. I'm going aboard the French freighter *Alfonse Daudet* before she sails. I expect to find Jacques Vrai aboard."

"Why do you say that, inspector?"

"When Jacques Vrai made his bold break this morning," Prike answered, "he very likely was sure he had means of escaping from India. I eliminate the usual agencies of transportation, naturally. In checking over the cargo ships sailing to-day, I've had a telephone conversation with Tartine & Cie., agents for the *Alfonse Daudet*. They tell me that the *Daudet* used to carry chrome ore from New Caledonia. It seems reasonable to suppose that Vrai would know some member of the crew from his Nouméa days, some one

he could bribe to stow him away. I—— Hello, what's this ? ”

A *chaprassi* had just deposited a slip of paper on Prike's desk.

“ Our men at the Telegraphs Administration,” said Prike, “ inform me that Gundranesh Dutt has just sent a wire to Rufus Dormer.”

“ Anything important ? ”

“ ‘ All is lost, Mr. Dormer. Kindly and urgently see me at promptest opportunity,’ ” Prike read. “ The interest here, Robbins, lies in the fact that the Babu seems to know Dormer's new address.”

“ I've got a man shadowing the Babu,” said Robbins.

“ I may go out for a look myself this evening,” said Prike. “ When you leave, Robbins, will you send in the police surgeon.”

The pink-browed doctor made his entrance a moment later.

“ Doctor,” said Prike, “ I'd like you to come to my rooms to-night between eleven and twelve. Bring your sphygmomanometer with you.”

“ Who's the patient, inspector ? ”

“ No patient,” said Prike. “ A prisoner. The man who murdered Hoyt and Julius.”

“ I'd advise you proceed cautiously, inspector. There's still no trace of poison in either body. Dr. Chaudry's laboratory has been working twenty-four hours a day, making test after test. . . .”

“ The two men were killed—chemically, then, if you object to the word ‘ poison,’ ” said Prike.

“ How, inspector ? ”

“ Dr. Chaudry found strong sodium and nitrogen bands in his spectro-analysis ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Indicating, possibly, the presence of sodium nitrite ? ”

"Both sodium nitrite and sodium nitrate are natural products of organic decomposition," said the toxicologist, "and you know very well, inspector, that decomposition begins immediately in this climate."

"Yes, indeed. However, let us assume that the sodium nitrite was administered before death——"

"But sodium nitrite is not a poison," protested the police surgeon. "We use it therapeutically. . . ."

"For what purpose?"

"To reduce high blood pressure, although in these days, amyl nitrite is——"

"What is the dose, doctor? Rather small, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite small. Less than a grain, usually."

"What would happen if a large dose were administered; large enough, say, to reduce a man's blood pressure to almost zero?"

"Well," said the police surgeon, "there would doubtless be a general dilatation of the circulatory system, a progressive dilatation of the heart to compensate for the lowered blood pressure. . . ."

"Ending in paralysis of the lungs," concluded Inspector Prike, "with accompanying cyanosis and other external symptoms of asphyxia?"

"By jove, inspector! Those *are* the symptoms, all right!" The police surgeon slapped his thigh. "What made you think of sodium nitrite?"

"I merely worked backward," the inspector said. "When you and Dr. Chaudry were unable to find traces of orthodox poisons, I assumed as a working basis that death was caused by the misuse of some normally harmless substance. The symptoms you described in both cases indicated a vasodilatator. Therefore I simply consulted my volume of *Materia Medica and Therapeutics*, opened to the chapter on vaso-dilatators, ran my finger over the page until I

came to something that would correspond with Dr. Chaudry's findings—and stopped at sodium nitrite."

"But sodium nitrite is slightly bitter, inspector. How could your man induce his victims to swallow it?"

"I admit this baffled me for a while, doctor. Then I marshalled all my evidence, and was struck by the fact that both Hoyt and Julius, six or seven hours before they died, had been drinking gin and bitters. My chief suspects—Vrai, Kobayashi, Linnet, and Chitterji Rao—were the drinking companions of each. It seems logical, therefore, that one of these men could load the drinks of his victim with sodium nitrite, the taste of which would be covered by the bitters."

"But how, inspector?"

"That," said Inspector Prike, "I shall demonstrate this evening. Good-afternoon, doctor."

Left alone, Inspector Prike spent some time studying the page of a hotel register that had arrived by plane from Singapore that afternoon, in response to his cable to the Straits police.

He then sent a man to relieve his operative at the Kalighat Temple, and talked by long-distance telephone with the subordinate he had sent to watch the religious observance of Diwali at the Temple of Kali in Jharnpur.

Finally the inspector asked for and received the forecast of flying conditions from the government meteorologists, and exchanged communications with C.I.D. agents at all airports in the Calcutta region.

His plans completed several hours before his scheduled boarding of the *Alfonse Daudet*, the inspector allowed himself the relaxation of following Babu Gundranesh Dutt—which resulted in the premature capture of Jacques Vrai in the graveyard.

CHAPTER XXIX

"JUST a little *soirée* I'm giving—in celebration of the Diwali Pooja," Prike explained to his involuntary guests as he conducted them from the Lower Circular Road cemetery to his home half a mile west.

The inspector's compound was alive with uniformed constables when he arrived with Jacques Vrai, Marvin, Evelyn Branch, and the two Babus. At the entrance to the drawing-room he removed Jacques Vrai's handcuffs. Inside, sitting in stiff silence, were Antoinette Vrai, George Linnet, Chitterji Rao, the Police Surgeon and four C.I.D. men in civilian clothes. One of the detectives had a grey-bearded Mohammedan with him.

Disregarding the tense atmosphere of expectancy that stifled conversation, Prike bustled about politely, seated every one, called his *khidmatgar*, ordered drinks, and behaved generally as if he were quite in earnest over the social character of his *soirée*. Then he said :

"I should like every one to roll up one sleeve, please. Did you bring your sphygmomanometer, doctor ? "

"Ready, inspector," said the police surgeon, opening his bag, taking out an array of bulb tubes and gauge, fitting the ends of a stethoscope into his ears.

"What is this," muttered Marvin. "A lie detector ? "

"I'm interested in the blood pressure of my guests," said Prike. "Will you keep a record, doctor."

Evelyn Branch leaned close to Marvin. "Why don't you roll up your sleeve ? " she whispered. "Is that where you're hiding it ? "

"Hiding what ? " Marvin didn't look at her.

"Don't dissimulate. Not with me. I saw you pick up something in the graveyard."

"You were seeing things."

"Lee Marvin, if you——"

"Shut up!" said Marvin.

"Chitterji Rao," said Prike, as the police surgeon was taking the Household Officer's blood pressure, "I'm sorry to hear that His Highness is having such an unfortunate Diwali. My agent at Jharnpur tells me that the Bengal lights burning on the Diwali boat, launched in the name of the Maharajah from the riverside temple there, were extinguished immediately by a gust of wind. Too bad that the goddess Kali could not see fit to favour the Maharajah's great project. Perhaps if she had been properly propitiated with a *nao-ratna*, a sufficiently valuable one. . . ."

"His Highness takes no stock in religious superstitions," purred Chitterji Rao.

"Ah?" Prike showed mock surprise. "Then why, do you suppose, that after the auguries of the Diwali lights foretold failure, that the Maharajah took off from the Calcutta airdrome in a plane carrying enough petrol to reach Siam."

"You must be mistaken."

"Rather the Maharajah was mistaken," Prike said. "His plane was forced down by a rainstorm at Dacca, an hour ago. It seems inevitable that His Highness will go to Delhi next week, to explain to the Viceroy something of these plans for which he was so anxious to have divine assistance. . . ."

"What—what plans?" asked Chitterji Rao. His olive skin had assumed a queer, greenish pallor.

"Hadn't you heard, my dear Chitterji Rao, that the Maharajah of Jharnpur has ambitions to free India from the odious British yoke?" asked Prike, still feigning surprise. "Yes, His Highness planned to

re-establish the great Mogul Empire, with himself on the throne. We British would be eliminated by a Second Sepoy Rebellion—which has been making excellent progress, I might add. . . .”

“Ridiculous!” declared Chitterji Rao.

“Admittedly,” said Prike, “and foolhardy. Particularly for a man as vain as His Highness.” The inspector opened a brief-case. Half a dozen of the brass belt buckles he had found in the Chandernagore godown, jungled in his hand. “Why didn’t he content himself with buying machine guns? Why did he have to see his rebels bearing the insignia of Akbar II into battle? Only the Maharajah of Jharnpur, who had so long flaunted his Mogul blood, would claim to be the successor to the great Akbar. I’m afraid the belt buckles were a fatal error—not at all worthy of the Maharajah’s cleverness in employing neutrals to avoid suspicion on the early organisation of rebellion. His impresario has been an American, the late Mr. Hoyt. His arms and munitions he has bought in Japan. His arsenal was on French soil at Chandernagore—through the courtesy of Jacques Vrai. . . .”

“No! Not true!” Jacques Vrai’s yellow teeth gleamed defiance. He sprang to his feet.

“No?” Inspector Prike again seemed mildly surprised. “The arsenal was connected by a tunnel with your wine cellar.”

“Ten days ago I did not know the tunnel was there. I swear it!”

“Then that gives you another reason for killing Hoyt—and Julius—and stabbing Dormer.”

“No, no! I killed no one. I—I——” He stopped, transfixed by the black, menacing stare of Antoinette. He shook his head violently, as though to rid himself of her influence, flung out his hands in a gesture of resignation, sat down weakly.

"I found the muddy prints of a woman's high heels on the floor of the godown," said Prike calmly, looking at Antoinette.

"Of course!" Jacques Vrai raised his head. "She was there. She knew about it. Otherwise, how do you suppose she could make Hoyt to marry her? She——"

He stopped. Antoinette was glaring at him, her face dark, her eyes clouded with the fumes of hate.

"This is your hour, little one." The corners of her mouth twisted downward in her disdain for Jacques. "Tell him! You have wanted to be an honest man for so long. This is your chance! You can be, oh, so honest now! Tell the truth! Tell everything!"

Jacques Vrai's chin went up a trifle.

"I am telling the truth," he said. "I stole the Maharajah's *parure* from Marvin's flat yesterday, *oui*. I frightened that simple-minded Babu into keeping them for me, yes. I was going to run away to-night, yes. But I stole so that I could begin again an honest life. When I stole before in Nouvelle Calédonie, it was for Antoinette. I loved her. But I tried to use the money to become honest. I bought the hotel. No use. Antoinette was bored. She humiliated me. She wanted excitement. She wanted Hoyt—because he was *plus malin qu'elle*, more cunning, smarter. . . . Together they would make a fine pair of *crapules*! Together they would go to America. It was always her *marotte*, America. So she got him. She found the tunnel in the cellar. She found the guns. But that was not enough. She could not make him marry her until she found that letter, two weeks ago. . . . She is blacker than the blackmailer!"

"It would seem," said Prike, approaching Antoinette, "that you have a letter for me."

Antoinette laughed with a strange, cold hysteria.

"I assume you have it on your person," continued Prike. "You would have normally transferred it to an intimate hiding-place, after my announcement this morning that I was going to search your room. May I have it, please?"

Antoinette did not reply.

"Mathilde," said Prike calmly, "if you don't give me the letter, I shall look for it myself. And for the first time in your life you will not enjoy being undressed—because I shall do it publicly."

Antoinette stopped laughing. She glared at Prike for an instant, then crossed her legs, brazenly gathered her green skirt about her hips, withdrew a folded paper from under her girdle, threw it at Prike.

"All right," she declared. "Take! It is no good to me now, anyhow. It is true, Harry Hoyt would have married me to get it back. But now he is dead, what use is it? It is not signed. . . ."

Inspector Prike stooped, picked up the letter, unfolded it, began reading aloud:

"Dear Hoyt: The proposition still sounds well. And you can tell the boss that the more I study the figures, the more it looks like success. After all, we'll have the man-power. There are only 60,000 British soldiers in India, and 170,000 sepoy. We'll have twenty-one troops of native cavalry to five white troops. They have all the artillery, of course—forty eight field-batteries—and six squadrons of planes. But we'll overcome that with the sheer number of our Japanese machine-guns. Keep 'em coming, as long as there's money to buy 'em, and you can fool the customs. We need another ten thousand at least, before we start sending 'em up-country.

"And speaking of money, I've been thinking over a crack you made to me a couple of weeks ago. You aren't figuring on getting any money out of *me*, are

you? If you ever shake me down, I won't hesitate a second about cutting your——"

The page ended in the midst of the threat. Prike turned it over. It was blank.

"I think it is safe—at least, it is polite—to assume that the next word was 'throat,' he said. "And I don't need the signature to tell me who wrote it. I know."

There was a commotion in the compound outside, as a car drove up. . . . Ten seconds later, the door to Inspector Prike's drawing-room burst open. Deputy Inspector Robbins marched in, proudly pushing before him the short, lynx-eyed Henry Kobayashi, well manacled.

"Here's your Raffles at last!" Robbins announced. "I told you I'd dig him up, inspector. Know where I found him? Hiding in the darkroom of a Jap photographer in Chandernagore. Put up a fight, too, but here he is."

The cocky little Japanese had lost all his American aggressiveness. His face was flushed, his manner subdued.

"Please take his blood pressure, doctor," said Prike to the police surgeon. "And you, Robbins, take off his cuffs."

The surgeon came over to roll up Kobayashi's sleeve, wrap his apparatus around his forearm.

"What good did you think running away was going to do, Mr. Kobayashi," Prike asked.

"Hell, it was my only chance," said Kobayashi. "The cards were stacked against me. I thought if I could stay under cover I might get a chance to clear myself. I wanted to stay out of sight till I could get proof from Japan that Hoyt was using the name of my Osaka outfit to frame me, in case of slip-ups. . . ."

"Slip-ups, my eye!" exclaimed Deputy Inspector Robbins. "He's your Raffles, inspector!"

Inspector Prike gave his subordinate a friendly pat on the shoulder. Then he produced the soiled scrap of paper he had found in Harrison Hoyt's *ghari* in Dharmtolla Street. He showed it to Henry Kobayashi.

"What do you make of this, Kobayashi?" Prike asked.

Kobayashi frowned at the paper, shook his head. "'Raffles 82335 he. . . .' Can't make it out," he said.

"Hoyt wrote this," said Prike, "as he was dying of suffocation produced by sodium nitrite introduced into his gin and bitters at his bachelor dinner. He knew he was dying—he wasn't even able to finish writing legibly—and evidently was trying to give some clue to what had happened. Can you make anything of it, Colonel Linnet?"

George Linnet's square jaw worked with an almost imperceptible side motion as he leaned forward to study the paper. He shook his head in the negative.

"Even if I read the numbers like this: Eight . . . twenty-three . . . thirty-five?" pursued Prike.

"Doesn't mean a thing to me," said Linnet.

"It does to me," Prike announced, "particularly since I have received from Singapore the register page for August 23, 1935, for the Hotel Raffles. On that date adjoining rooms at the Raffles were occupied by Harrison Hoyt and George Linnet."

"Well?" Linnet's jaw stopped working.

"You told me last night, colonel, that you had not seen Hoyt for three years, yet he evidently met you in Singapore not very many weeks ago. Was that when you first threatened to kill him, colonel?"

"That's all bunk! I——"

"I'm very much afraid, Colonel Linnet," said Prike, slipping his hands into his coat pockets, "that your

dream of being known to history as the military genius whose brilliant strategy drove the British out of India and re-established the Mogul Empire is definitely ended. To-morrow morning you will be formally charged with murder."

"Murder?" Linnet's shoulders straightened. "You're crazy!"

"I have a holograph letter," said Prike, "which handwriting experts will surely attribute to you. Even I can note the similarity with your signature on the hotel register. Your letter makes it quite clear that Hoyt was working his usual blackmail game. He involved you in a plot, and then was on the point of exposing the plot unless you gave him money. When the shipment of arms was seized in Singapore, the day before you arrived in Calcutta, you thought he was making good his threat, so you killed him. . . ."

"Not I!"

"Yes, you did. Hoyt was afraid of you. The reason he did not meet the steamer *Bangalore Thursday*, was that you were aboard. He was not avoiding Evelyn Branch, because he went to see her that same night. . . . And by the way, colonel, it was not very gallant of you to plant one of Kurt Julius's silver buttons in Miss Branch's room, after you had fed him sodium nitrite and knew he would be dead by morning. I know that you suggested to her that Lee Marvin had left the button, hoping that she would involve Marvin, but I am a little surprised that you should jeopardise a woman in order to misdirect suspicion from yourself. . . ."

"What are you talking about, inspector?"

Prike turned his back for a moment. He addressed the surgeon.

"Doctor, what did you find out about the systolic and diastolic tension of my guests?"

"They're all about normal, inspector," said the

surgeon, "except one case of hypertension. Mr. Linnet, there, runs up a pressure of about 180."

"I thought he would," said Prike. "I thought he had been treated at some time for high blood-pressure. He seems so familiar with the action of nitrites. . . . By the way, colonel, what was it that Kurt Julius wanted to tell me, that you had to kill him? Too bad he waited so long, or we might have kept the knife out of Rufus Dormer's back. I suppose you had to try to kill Dormer, too, when you found him dodging through the godown door that Jacques Vrai had left open, and found he knew about your arms cache. . . ."

"You're insane!"

"On the contrary," said Inspector Prike. "You were insane in the case of Dormer. Of course, I realise that you had to act quickly, and without the clever preparation you used on Hoyt and Julius. Nevertheless, Colonel Linnet, you should not have used the knife that you did, because stamped into the blade, very near the hilt, are the tiny letters, 'E.B.'—which I know stand for '*Ejército Boliviano*.' You told me yourself, colonel, that you served with the Bolivian Army in the Gran Chaco, so I expect to have no trouble in court, proving ownership of the knife. . . ."

"It must have been stolen from me. I was with you, inspector, when Dormer was stabbed."

"You were not," countered Prike. "You were with me when I heard Dormer's cry of pain. But before that he must have been moaning and shrieking for ten minutes—or as long as it would take a badly wounded man to crawl the length of that tunnel. I tried the acoustics of the tunnel this morning, Linnet, and I found that a man sitting in the bar of the Hotel Duplex could hear no sounds made anywhere in that tunnel except at the opening behind the wine casks—where we found Dormer."

"That's pretty far-fetched!"

"If you insist upon being stubborn," said Prike grimly, "I shall ask you to remove the glove from your left hand."

The muscles tightened about Linnet's jaw. "I have an infirmity, inspector."

"Yes, I know. You have three fingers missing. Then perhaps you will watch my demonstration. . . ." From his brief-case Prike took one grey glove and three over-sized fountain-pens. "Notice that by unscrewing the upper segment of the barrel of each of these pens," he continued, "I am able to remove quite easily the rubber reservoirs and the pen-points. The tubular reservoirs, you will note, fit nicely into the fingers of the glove—thus. You will also note that the tubes in the two shorter fingers are long enough so that the pen—or open end—extends down to the usual opening in the palm of the glove. Now, if these rubber reservoirs were filled with a saturated solution of sodium nitrite, and the man wearing the glove exerted pressure with his only good digits—the thumb and little finger—it would seem quite simple to expel some of the solution into a glass of gin and bitters which he was about to pick up by the brim with his left hand. . . ."

"Pure supposition. . . ."

"Not at all." Prike beckoned to one of his detectives. "Jenkins, is that your man from the bazaar?"

"Yes, inspector." Jenkins pushed the bearded Mohammedan forward.

"Mr. Sustî," said Prike, "I understand that on Thursday afternoon you sold three Jumbo fountain-pens to one man. Is that man here to-night?"

"*Woh admi hai*," said the Mohammedan.

He pointed to Linnet.

"That's all," said Prike. "Thank you."

George Linnet stood up stiffly. He looked about

him, a haunted expression coming into his eyes as they travelled from one tense face to another. Suddenly he faced Prike and saluted.

"At your service, inspector," he said. "You win."

Prike's response was a curt nod. Then he clapped his hands twice.

"*Khidmatgar*," he said, when a servitor appeared, "ask my guests what they will have to drink. Give them anything they want—except gin and bitters. For myself, bring brandy."

"Just a minute, inspector." Lee Marvin was on his feet. "May I speak to Chitterji Rao?"

"Why?"

"It's about that *nao-ratna*. Chitterji Rao promised a reward to Miss Branch here, if she could return it to him by midnight to-night. It's not quite midnight. . . ."

"Has Miss Branch recovered the *nao-ratna*, then?"

"Yes," said Marvin. "She . . . she found it."

"Where did I find it?" the girl asked.

Marvin hesitated. Then he grinned.

"In my pocket," he said.

"The only drawback to these negotiations," said Prike, "is the fact that the Maharajah can hardly pay a reward for the return of a jewel that is not missing. I have a written statement from Mr. Chitterji Rao to the effect that the *nao-ratna* has already been returned. . . ."

"I see. . . ." Marvin was pensive a moment. Then he said. "In that case, if to-morrow morning I should send the Maharajah of Jharnpur a cheque—for an amount which Orfèvre, Ltd., has authorised me to pay—His Highness could not very well refuse to accept it, could he?"

"I should think," said Prike, "that His Highness would consider himself extremely lucky. . . . Will you have some of this brandy, Mr. Marvin? It's Armagnac, 1900. I think you'll find it rather mellow."

In the taxi that rolled down Lower Circular Road, Evelyn Branch said to Lee Marvin, "I hope you're satisfied. You've done me out of my reward."

"I'm satisfied," said Marvin, "but I haven't done you out of your reward. Orfèvre, Ltd., is paying that. They've authorised me to go to extra expense."

"And when do I get paid?"

"I'll give you a cheque to-night," said Marvin, "on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you don't spend the money for a ticket home."

"But why shouldn't I?"

"Because. . . ." Marvin seized the girl's shoulders, turned her towards him in the dark. "Damn it, Evelyn! Don't go home!"

The girl smiled into the wind. "Is this by any chance your own quaint way of proposing?" she asked.

"It would be," said Marvin. "You know it would be, if a proposal wouldn't seem a little indecent, when we've known each other only two days."

"Two days and nine hours," said Evelyn.

"Damn it, you've got to stick around a while, Evelyn. Calcutta really isn't a bad place during the cold weather. You'll find it quieter . . . and the racing starts in a few weeks. . . ."

"Will you help me find a job, if I stay?"

"Help you find one? You've got one. You're working for Orfèvre, Ltd., at nine o'clock Monday. . . ."

There was a pause.

"Just the same," said the girl, "I think I'll buy a steamship ticket with the money."

"Evelyn! Will I have to give you that thrashing after all?"

"But not for myself. Will you tell the driver—or

tell me how to say it ; I may as well start learning Hindustani—‘ Go to the Presidency General Hospital.’ ”

Rufus Dormer was conscious when they arrived. He had regained enough strength to be able to sneer—which he promptly did, when Marvin made the girl’s offer.

“ I don’t need your charity,” he said weakly.

“ But Miss Branch said she promised you half her reward from Chitterji Rao. She wants you to go back to England for your convalescence.”

“ England ! ” Dormer sniffed. “ Why would any one who had the luck to get away from England want to go back there ? I had the misfortune to be born there, but I never want to see Europe again. . . . ”

“ And Elizabeth Ann ? ” asked Evelyn softly.

Rufus Dormer raised his head abruptly from his pillow, stared at Evelyn as though she were a ghost. When his head fell back, he tried to twist his lips again into his stock sneer, but it was no use. His lips were quivering like a child’s. The professional cynic could no longer wear his mask. The bitter, sardonic Rufus Dormer was crying.

Marvin turned away from the hospital bed. Evelyn took his hand, tiptoed towards the door. Marvin put his arm around her.

“ Let’s go,” Evelyn whispered, “ so that when I kiss you, it won’t taste like iodoform.”

But Marvin didn’t seem to mind iodoform in the least.

THE END

THE AUTHOR

LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

THE Eastern setting of Lawrence G. Blochman's crime novels is absolutely authentic, for he has had long and varied experience of life in India and other Eastern countries. For some time he worked as journalist and photographer for *The Englishman* (since merged with *The Statesman*) of Calcutta. His duties for this newspaper carried him from Bengal to Bombay, and from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, on such varied missions as representing *The Englishman* at the Delhi Conference called by Government to discuss wireless broadcasting; describing the Poojah merry-makers on the beach at Puri and the religious pilgrims at the Gunga Mela; reporting the Viceroy's speech to the European Association, and travelling with a cargo of rhinos and baby tigers being shipped to a Hamburg Zoo by a wild-animal buyer; interviewing Dr. McGovern on his return from Tibet and spending several weeks as guest of the then Maharajah of Indore, following the escape of one of his Nautch girls to Bombay and the murder of her Mohammedan protector. He has also travelled and worked as a journalist in China and Japan.

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